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Karen Taylor
“Prevention Starts at Home:”
Mapping the Discourse Parents who
Work in Sexual Assault-Related
Fields Create with their Children
about Sexual Assault

ABSTRACT

This original empirical research study explores the discourse that parents who work in sexual assault-related fields create with their own children about sexual assault. The experience and perspectives of these parents was elicited through self-developed, semi-structured interviews composed of questions that encouraged parents to reflect on their parenting practices that they relate to or could be influenced by their professional knowledge and understanding of sexual assault, as well as how they navigate their dual roles as members of this field and as parents. Major findings were that parents do create a discourse about sexual assault, composed of communication about sexual assault, the continuum of sexual violence, sexuality, gender constructs, and safety, with themes of respect, consent, and healthy relationships interwoven among all of these topics. While there was variation in emphasis and specificity in each participant’s discourse and often within the discourse among an individual participant’s children, the majority of participants actively communicated about all of these topics. This study was conceived of as having the potential to contribute to sexual assault prevention and early intervention efforts. Implications of this study suggest that this area represents fertile ground for sexual assault prevention and that further exploration is warranted.

**“PREVENTION STARTS AT HOME:” MAPPING THE DISCOURSE PARENTS WHO
WORK IN SEXUAL ASSAULT-RELATED FIELDS CREATE WITH THEIR
CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUAL ASSAULT**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

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This thesis is dedicated to my family, for always inspiring me to make the world a better place, and to Juan, for reminding me daily how good it already is.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Sexual assault in the United States is perpetrated at alarmingly high rates, with between 17 to slightly over 25% of women experiencing attempted or completed rape in their lifetime, depending on measurements used, and around 3% of men reporting victimization (National Institute of Justice [NIJ], 2010). Among women who reported sexual assault in their lifetime, 54% of these attacks took place while the victim was under the age of 18 (NIJ, 2010). At most reliable estimates, only 39% of these crimes are ever reported to law officials (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2008), and for the most part rapes do not receive the type of public attention that is frequently riveted on other crime epidemics.

At the same time, the myths about sexual assault—that it requires the use of physical force and it is desired by women—as well as “blame the victim” attitudes of society at large continue to obscure the existence and location of blame for these crimes and to implicitly justify their occurrence (Abbey, 2005; Eastal, 1993). As recently as 2011, women on a college campus in Toronto were told by a police department representative that they could avoid sexual assault by not dressing “like a slut” (Kwan, 2011). The bruising, torn ligaments, and DNA evidence of a hotel maid who accused a powerful politician of rape were discounted and criminal charges against him dismissed because law enforcement learned that the woman had been dishonest in other domains of her life (Eligon, 2011). Only in January 2012 was the federal definition of rape, used by the FBI to track prevalence statistics, updated from its original 1920s version to

now include forced oral and anal penetration with an object, the rape of men, rape of women by women, and all situations where consent cannot be freely given even if physical force is not used (Savage, 2012).

These myths and attitudes have dangerous consequences, including deterring many rape survivors from disclosing their assault to law enforcement and seeking medical help, or for those who do disclose or request care, resulting in a sense of revictimization as they are met with disbelief, blame, or other stigmatizing responses (Maier, 2008). As the case of the only-recently-updated FBI definition illustrates, thousands of the reported incidents of sexual assault have been discounted in federal reporting, throwing into question the validity of federally aggregated statistics, such as the ones related above (Goode, 2011). These statistical inaccuracies and denial of certain rape scenarios have in turn perpetuated many rape myths and contributed to a general lack of awareness.

However, despite these dominant attitudes, there are thousands of people who have dedicated themselves, either through their career or as activists, to the prevention of and attuned response to sexual assault. Some of the internalization processes and transformative effects on women engaging in this work are already known (Clemans, 2004; Goldblatt, Buchbinder, Eisikovits, & Arizon-Mesinger, 2009), yet very little attention has been paid to the impact on parenting. This study begins that exploration through mapping out the discourse parents who work in sexual assault-related fields create with their own children about sexual assault.

Discourse, for the purposes of this study, is defined as including the ongoing approach to and communication about a topic, including nonverbal and behavioral communications in addition to specific language usage. Parents who have in some way been dedicated to a sexual assault related field (whether through paid work or volunteer contributions) were selected to

compose the sample for this study because it can reasonably be assumed that they have a high-awareness of sexual assault brought on, at least in part, through their engagement with the work. While such an awareness is not the unique purview of people who work in the field, this particular study is interested in the influence of engagement within the field on one's parenting, and is thus limited to people with this experience.

Exploration focused on how these parents navigate their parallel roles as professionals who aim to reduce the impact of sexual assault on individuals and society at large and as parents responsible for providing for the safety and wellbeing of their offspring. To map the topography of the discourse, participants were asked, among other questions, how they approach sexual assault, gender, and sexuality with their children as well as their experience of influence, both positive and negative, from their work. Analysis of their narratives suggested the core elements of their discourses as well as techniques and strategies they use in creating the discourse, their reasons for doing so, and the issues and challenges they face in this venture.

The previous lack of research into this topic is particularly ripe for redress as parents hold the unique position of being the first major socializing influence on children. It can be reasonably assumed, or at least deemed worthy for exploration, that parents could function as a primary prevention/early intervention force in their children's lives, countering the dominant myths and rape-accepting attitudes of society at large while their children are still very young. This research, beyond providing insight into the particular experience of this group of parents, has the potential to elucidate primary prevention practices already employed by this group, which could then form the basis for new intervention models to be shared with other parents and eventually be evaluated for effectiveness using longitudinal, quantitative measures; how these

parents go about transmitting their knowledge, understanding, and value system related to rape and sexual assault might suggest routes for transforming our rape-supportive culture.

This research is highly relevant to the field of social work and reflects the core values of service, social justice, the importance of human relationships, and competence (National Association of Social Workers, [NASW] 2008). The first two ethical principles listed in NASW's (2008) Code of Ethics state, "*Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems*" and "*Social workers challenge social injustice.*" It is well established that sexual assault in the United States (and around the globe) is a major social problem that primarily targets women and vulnerable populations, such as children, prisoners, and non-dominant group members (Herman, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 2001; National Center for Victims of Crime, 2011). People who have experienced the trauma of rape are at risk of resulting mental and emotional health difficulties, such as the concomitant feelings of isolation, shame, and loss of trust that frequently occur and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Allen, 2001; Herman, 1992). The impact of the trauma and the course of recovery are made worse when rape survivors are met with blame and disbelief, two common components of a rape-supportive culture (Doherty & Anderson, 1998). Any work that seeks to decrease the number of assaults—the central purpose of primary prevention efforts—upholds the values to which the social work profession is committed. While this project will not directly result in fewer people being subjected to rape, it explores a previously neglected avenue moving in that direction.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This chapter will address some of the issues connected to the study of and fight to end rape, although it is by no means meant to serve as a comprehensive exploration. The literature of sexual assault is vast, a home to heated controversies and multiple points of entry; a review that completely covered the current state of the field as well as its historical context is out of the scope of this particular paper. Yet a review of only recent research findings and trends, which would provide a contemporary snapshot of the work being done, would not provide the grounding for an investigation into the discourse parents create with their children and its potential for guiding the field. The theories, movements, and polemics that have shaped discussions of sexual assault in the academy and the media offer a useful framework for such an undertaking.

For this reason, this chapter will examine the main theoretical positions taken in the writing about rape and contextualize them historically. This discussion will set out the theoretical framework upon which this present study is based and argue for a synthesis of what are too often conceived of as opposing and mutually exclusive viewpoints. Focus will then shift to a discussion of recent directions in sexual assault prevention followed by research about parents from within and outside of a sexual assault perspective. This literature supports and challenges the premise of the current study, that there is a discourse around sexual assault created by parents who work in the field that holds promise as an area deserving of further investigation.

The Personal Process Of Theorizing Rape

Before moving into these discussions, however, I feel it important to make transparent my own position and process as I have engaged with this topic as a researcher. Anderson and Doherty (1997) underscore the necessity of “functional reflexivity (a sustained critical reflection of research practice) and personal reflexivity (critical reflection on the way in which the researcher’s identity, interests and values may be expressed in the process of research)” (pp. 547-8) in research that claims social change around rape as its goal, a goal that I enthusiastically share and to which I am committed.

In the interest of personal reflexivity, and as the starting point for functional reflexivity about the methodology and approach of the proposed research, I find it important to transparently locate myself within this topic and in my position as author and sole researcher. While as a White, U.S. citizen, I lay claim to a number of privileged social identities that bestow numerous benefits to me, like many people whose sense of self in the world also includes targeted social identities, it is these affiliations that are more often salient in my self-concept (Miller & Garran, 2008). As such my female body and personal identification as a woman enter into my conscious awareness and noticeably affect my daily life in a way that my identities as a native English speaker or my class background do not. Though identification as a woman does not have a causal relationship to identification with feminism, (nor is identification as a woman required in order to embrace feminism), in my case, the two go together. “The struggle to end sexist oppression,” bell hooks’ (1984/2000) definition of feminism, speaks to me deeply as a woman and calls for my participation. This bond has no doubt been strengthened by my awareness of the omnipresence of sexual assault, whether in actuality or in threat, which was made explicit during my late adolescence, and of the outsized role it has taken in my decision-

making and in my perceptions of the world. In various roles—as a peer counselor on a rape trauma phone line and drop-in center, as a mental health worker on an inpatient psychiatric unit for patients with histories of severe childhood sexual abuse, as a close friend and family member of multiple survivors of sexual assault and acquaintance of too many to count, and in training as a clinical social worker—I have witnessed and experienced many of the devastating effects of rape, and also seen how the burden of rape tends to fall differentially onto the shoulders of women and men, despite what we know about who commits the crime in at least 98% of cases (Frey & Douglas, 1993). For all these reasons, and likely more, I undertake this work with the desire to help bring about a world without rape.

As the tenets of third-wave feminism and postmodernist thought by and large form the default lens through which I view most social and intellectual issues, including that of sexual assault, I embrace the *social structural* model of rape (Crawford, 1995; O’Byrne, Hansen, & Rapley, 2008). That model points to the oppressive forces that exist within and as reinforcement of patriarchal societies that justify viewing and treating women (and all members of oppressed groups, I would add) as less than, in effect both eliciting violence perpetrated against these demeaned members of society and mitigating the consequences thereof. Likewise, the notion of a *rape culture* or a *rape supportive culture* (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993; Doherty & Anderson, 1998) that recursively constitutes and is constituted by legal, educational, and media systems and commonly held attitudes (rape myths) that place blame on victims of rape and minimize the actions and culpability of perpetrators, is, I believe, an apt classification for the contemporary United States of America.

In first applying a theoretical framework to my own research, I was content to stay within feminist and social constructionist schools of thought, an alliance that Anderson and Doherty

(1997) argue is well suited for research into sexual assault. However, I have taken efforts to broaden this original stance into one that adopts social work's dedication to the biopsychosocial components of any phenomenon of human behavior; giving open consideration to the arguments from evolutionary psychologists was a major part of these efforts. While the frequent use of the terms "evolved" and "natural" to describe rape generally did not sit well with me—someone outside of that particular field—because of the terms' vernacular connotations of progress, improvement, morality, and inevitability (Ellis, Widmayer & Palmer, 2009; Pinker, 2002; Thornhill & Palmer, 2002), I came to believe that rejecting the potential contributions of evolutionary psychology in reaction to its language or because the theories challenge a dogmatic adherence to social constructionism is to let misunderstanding and allegiance to ideology rule over the difficult work of acknowledging complexities and working towards synthesis. As such, in presenting the arguments from evolutionary psychologists, I have worked to overcome my initial aversion and to engage with their arguments in good faith, meaning that I accept the use of terms such as *adaptive* and *evolved* as established in their discipline, thus separating them from their meaning in popular culture.

That said, a critical eye toward overall use of language is applied in my examination of evolutionary psychologists' work. I still feel strongly that the language used in discussions of rape is of utmost importance; it is through language that we continue to propagate rape myths, justify unjustifiable behaviors, and define what rape is and how our legal system will recognize it (O'Byrne et al., 2008; Doherty & Anderson, 1998; Jones, 2000; Goode, 2011; Benedict, 1993). The negative responses from family, friends, and institutions that many survivors of sexual assault experience after disclosing to them, acts of communication and language, are major predictors of deleterious mental health outcomes, including increased prevalence of depression

and posttraumatic stress; rape myth acceptance creates an overall social milieu that impedes recovery following a rape (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009).

As the following discussion of the theoretical and historical approaches to sexual assault should prove, social work's commitment to integrating the biological, psychological, and social when attempting to understand human behavior and fight for human wellbeing is particularly well suited to anti-rape work. The reader is encouraged to keep this approach in mind, as well as to pay attention to one's own process of engaging with these issues, as attention now turns to specific theories of rape and their historical context.

Contextualizing and Theorizing Rape

Rape, racism, and misogyny. While depictions and acknowledgement of rape are prevalent in art and literature dating back to at least Greek and Roman mythology and the stories of the Old Testament, sustained attention to rape as a major social problem (and not a problem of property theft) began with the women's movement of the 1970s that came to be classified as second-wave feminism (Herman, 1992). Prior to this time, rape (and all interpersonal trauma more typically experienced by women and children, such as domestic violence and sexual abuse) received only sporadic public attention and was largely ignored by the United States' legal system (Conway, Ahern, & Steuernagel, 2005). Most psychological and sociological attempts to understand the phenomenon located the problem in the (usually female) victim, with the main exception in the United States (though not unique to this country) found in cases and fear of interracial rape, where White women's purity, the property of White men, was seen as under threat of Black men's "animal lust" and often used to justify lynchings and other violent and discriminatory actions against African Americans (Wriggins, 1995).

Not surprisingly, White men raping Women of Color, a far more frequently occurring scenario of perpetration, did not engender similar outrage in the dominant society; this pattern of rape had been established through centuries of slavery, where it was perpetrated to force impregnation (to increase a slave owner's quantity of human property) and to further White slaveholders' dominance over the people they considered as chattel (Brownmiller, 1975). Female slaves who resisted were severely beaten or killed, making submission the safest response. This survival tactic was mislabeled as willingness and used as evidence of Black women's promiscuity, a pervasive and pernicious stereotype that continues to this day (Brownmiller, 1975; Eastal, 1993; Kingsnorth & Lopez, 1998). Voicing a common opinion, a Florida court in 1918 proposed that non-White women were "unchaste" and "immoral," thus rendering moot any claim of rape they might make, regardless of the race of the perpetrator (Wriggins, 1995, p. 221). The racist legacy of rape judgments continues to be apparent in the legal system. In a study published in 1998, Kingsnorth and Lopez found that while arrest, filing of charges, trial proceedings, and verdict were equally likely regardless of the racial identities of perpetrator and victim, black perpetrators found guilty of raping white victims were more likely to be imprisoned and for longer sentences. When they disaggregated their study data by acquaintance or stranger rape, the racial identity of the victim and perpetrator showed strong effect, with black perpetrators convicted of the rape of a black acquaintance receiving the shortest sentences (Kingsnorth & Lopez, 1998).

Although Freud briefly broke through the silence to suggest childhood sexual abuse as the etiology of "hysteria" toward the end of the 19th century, he shortly thereafter recanted, bowing to societal pressure and the disdain of the academy in which he sought acceptance, and replaced his seduction theory with *phantasy* and the *Oedipal Complex*; women's "hysteria" was

no longer caused by the traumatic experience of rape but by their overwhelming guilt for desiring and fantasizing incestuous relations with their fathers (Herman, 1992). Subsequent psychoanalysts proposed that *feminine masochism*, which included the belief that “what the woman secretly desires in intercourse is rape and violence, or in the mental sphere, humiliation,” was an inevitable result of penis envy (Horney, 1935/1973, p. 18). This line of thinking is still extant in what Crawford (1995) labels the *victim precipitation model*, in which women’s actions or inactions are indicated as the cause of an assault, often with the suggestion of the victim having “asked for it”.

A feminist redefinition. It was this victim-blaming and dismissive conceptualization of rape that the women’s movement of the 1970s fought relentlessly to dispel (Herman, 1992). To counter the prevailing notion about women’s hidden desires and men’s uncontrollable lust, feminists proposed that rape was not a sexual act, it was instead an act of power and violence. Susan Brownmiller (1975) famously crystallized this sentiment in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* stating, rape “is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear” (p. 15, italics in the original). Seeking an explanation that did not center on a woman’s masochism, seductiveness, and/or unfair withholding of promised sex, the women’s movement redefined rape and turned the focus to its societal impact as a tool of oppression. Declaring the United States a “rape culture,” they identified patriarchal social institutions and the traditional construction of gender roles as two of the main factors enabling and even encouraging the prevalence of rape by teaching men, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, to rape. Pornography was theorized as sex discrimination that reinforces the idea of men’s entitlement to sex on demand, depicts women as merely sexual

objects, and suggests that women experienced pain with pleasure, again continuing the view that women desire rape (MacKinnon, 1986/1995; Steinem, 1993).

Feminist researchers identified and provided counterarguments to “rape myths”—the faulty, commonly held beliefs that supported the rape culture by blaming rape victims and excusing perpetrators. Some such myths were identified as the belief that rape is usually perpetrated by a stranger, that it requires the use of physical force, is desired by women, and that women who are “highly sexed”—a label most often applied to women of color in white-dominated societies—behaved in a way to cause rape (Abbey, 2005; Eastal, 1993). These myths have dangerous consequences, including deterring many survivors from disclosing their assault to law enforcement and seeking medical help, or for those who do disclose or request care, resulting in a sense of revictimization and increased traumatization as they are met with disbelief, blame, or other stigmatizing responses (Maier, 2008; Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009). Studies have also found that men who subscribe to rape myths engage in more sexually aggressive behaviors against women than peers who do not support these myths and are less likely to intervene to stop an assault when presented with the opportunity (Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011; Hall & Hirschman, 1993).

Turning a critical eye toward their own discipline, scholars with a feminist and social constructionist frame of reference have pointed out how some study designs and conclusions are evidence of a strong male bias within the academy and can be damaging to survivors of sexual assault (Travis, 2003; Vandermassen, 2011). Researchers who do not critically reflect on their use of concepts and language when describing and studying rape and rape-related phenomena are likely to reproduce these myths and other “patriarchal assumptions” in their own work, further cementing them into the cultural milieu (Anderson & Doherty, 1997, p. 549). Though the

explicit statements suggesting that rape is secretly desired by women have largely been relegated to fringe commentary, the effluent of this viewpoint continues to seep into contemporary discourse through language that overtly or implicitly blames victims for precipitating an assault and exculpates perpetrators (O’Byrne et al., 2008). Even researchers working to prevent sexual assault use language that completely omits the perpetrator’s willful commission of a crime and focuses only on the female victim’s actions, such as the definition of *incapacitated rape* supplied by researchers evaluating an intervention for college-age women: “non-consensual intercourse that occurs as a result of the woman drinking to the point of unconsciousness or incapacitation and being unable to resist sexual advances (Testa et al. 2003)” (Testa, Hoffman, Livingston & Turrisi, 2010, p. 309).” Substance abuse plays a major role in many sexual assaults, particularly on college campuses, and is deserving of the study it receives. However, a definition that only focuses on the actions or inactions of a victim of rape leaves out the crucial component of the equation—the person (or group of people) who initiates and perpetrates the “non-consensual intercourse.”

A seemingly more palatable but still deeply problematic viewpoint taken in both research and general discourse conceives of most rapes as the result of miscommunication, a product of the different communication styles employed by the sexes (Crawford, 1995; O’Byrne et al., 2008). The following excerpt of an interview with a 23-year-old man illustrates this model:

I’ve heard all kinds of stories where the woman says, “No! No! No!” and they end up making great love. I get confused as hell if a woman pushes me away. Does it mean she’s trying to be a nice girl and wants to put up a good appearance, or does it mean she doesn’t want anything to do with you? You don’t know (Beneke, 1982/1995, p. 57).

This third “interpretive repertoire” is often the theoretical underpinning of intervention programs and campaigns that focus on the bestowing and receiving of informed consent (O’Byrne et al., 2008). While consent is vital and should ideally be an intrinsic component of sexual activity, O’Byrne et al. (2008) demonstrate how men and women do have a shared understanding of “how *everyday* refusals are normatively done,” (which rarely encompass the almost legal authority connoted by *consent*) and that the miscommunication model is most frequently deployed in conversation in the same manner as rape myths, to exculpate the perpetrator and scrutinize the actions of the victim (p. 189). Schewe (2002a, citing Groth, 1979 and Pithers et al., 1998) suggests paying attention to misunderstandings (a linguistic substitution which puts the onus back on the interpreter of the message rather than the person relaying it) is important because misunderstanding can lead to anger, which is the “most common immediate precursor to rape” (p. 115). The focus on anger, and the belief structure in place that would cause a man to become angry with a woman because he believed himself to have been misled about or denied sex to which he thought he was entitled, is congruent with feminist theory. Summarizing the feminist, social structural approach to intervention, O’Byrne et al. argues, “the key to preventing rape lies in changing societal attitudes about rape, rape myths and about men and women” (p. 171).

The evolutionary rebuttal. The second-wave feminist definition of rape and rape myths has received the most criticism from evolutionary psychology, most notoriously through Thornhill and Palmer’s (2000) book, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*, hereafter referred to as ANHR, and the firestorm of controversy that followed. In that book, Thornhill and Palmer consider rape as a reproductive adaptation or a by-product of adaptations, and present their evidence for both hypotheses. In a follow-up defense of their work, the authors point out how much of the criticism their book received was composed of

logical errors, limited knowledge of science, and a misrepresentation of their arguments (Thornhill & Palmer, 2002). They reiterated their argument with social constructionism, citing science on their side:

...although a given rapist may have numerous motivations for committing a rape, social constructionists have not seriously and honestly considered the vast evidence showing that rapists are sexually motivated. Although we agree that culture (that is, social learning, or learning resulting from experience with other members of the same species) plays a significant role in causing rape, we challenge the notion that rape occurs only when males are taught by their culture to rape (p. 283).

This argument deserves to be engaged with as the field continues to seek effective prevention, keeping in mind that if a simple or one-size-fits-all solution were possible, it would probably have been discovered already. The challenge to excluding sexual motives from rape is echoed by evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker (2002), who defends ANHR in his popular book, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. However, a few sentences after acknowledging how, for rape victims, rape is experienced as violence, not sex, (one of the two truths he acknowledges for second-wave feminism's conceptualization of rape as an issue of power and violence, not sex), Pinker follows up by stating:

“I believe that the rape-is-not-about-sex doctrine will go down in history as an example of extraordinary popular delusions and the madness of crowds. It is preposterous on the face of it, does not deserve its sanctity, is contradicted by a mass of evidence and is getting in the way of the only morally relevant goal surrounding rape, the effort to stamp it out” (362).

While the end goal is most certainly agreeable, one wonders why an academic no doubt acquainted with polemics would classify a strategically essentialist statement (indeed, Judith Herman (1992) describes the argument as a “simplistic formulation...advanced to counter the view that rape fulfilled women’s deepest desires, a view then prevailing in every form of literature, from popular pornography to academic texts” [p. 30]) as lunacy. Though it seems that Pinker means to argue that the concept, held to as dogma, has outlasted its usefulness, or that it at least cannot be seen as being the entire truth, he ends up suggesting that it never had any legitimacy. Pinker’s very choice of the terms *delusions* and *madness of crowds* is particularly problematic given how much they echo the *hysteria* and *phantasy* characterizations through which women’s experience of trauma has been repeatedly explained away and part of why second-wave feminists had to make such a bold claim to begin with (Herman, 1992). Evolutionary psychology and feminism do not have to be at odds (nor are they, necessarily, as will be discussed next). However, by framing his argument in such historically-laden terms, Pinker does nothing to bring the two closer together.

Vandermassen (2011) criticizes both the misleading arguments made against ANHR and Thornhill and Palmer’s selective and at times misleading use of evidence to support their own arguments and to dismiss feminists’ work. Discussing the former, Vandermassen provides examples of the ad hominem and straw-man attacks leveled against the authors. On the latter front, she details how Thornhill and Palmer are dismissive of how anger, hostility, and the desire for dominance figure in to men’s decisions to rape and inaccurately characterize research findings to support their arguments that reproductive-aged women are more traumatized by rape and that violence can have a mitigating effect on traumatization (Vandermassen, 2011).

However, Vandermassen (2011) also makes a compelling argument for how an evolutionary understanding must be incorporated into a comprehensive theory of rape and that feminists and evolutionists need not view each other from opposing sides. Both are concerned with power and sexuality, and a combined perspective can help to explain why the two are so often intertwined (Smuts, 1995 as cited by Vandermassen). A theoretical framework that does not make space for biological contributions is limiting its own applicability in a highly detrimental manner (Vandermassen, 2011).

Moving Toward Synthesis. Other thinkers in the field have also made the argument for combining knowledge from multiple disciplines in order to better understand and prevent rape. After a summary discussion of what feminist, evolutionary, and social learning theories say about rape, Oliver and Chambers (1993) conclude:

It may be helpful to think of these theories as complementary, rather than trying to determine which theory is unequivocally correct. Sexual aggression may then be viewed as being possibly caused by a cluster of factors (e.g. biological, family, individual) with interdependent variables contributing to each factor (p. 9).

Third wave feminism has also largely left behind the strong dividing line between considering sex and rape in relationship to each other. One promising way that contemporary feminists are accomplishing this mission, electrifyingly proposed in *Yes means yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape* (Friedman & Valenti, 2008), is through addressing the absence of *female sexual agency* in the discussions of rape and prevention and suggesting how a positive, non-shaming approach to sexuality is key to the dismantlement of a rape culture. Instead of a categorical negation to rape being “about sex,” the general view now is both yes and no, and somewhat context dependent. To those who have been victimized by rape, being able to separate

this crime from consensual intercourse might be an important factor in their recovery. For those creating interventions, finding messages and tactics effective at inhibiting sexual motivations might be a fruitful path to pursue. Just as the nature vs. nurture debate concerning the origins of behavior has been dismissed as a false dichotomy, a more dialectical approach has been brought to the issue of rape.

This general approach fits within the ecological viewpoint that characterizes social work's commitment to understanding human behavior within the social environment rather focusing on isolated factors. However, McMahon and Schwartz (2011) found that very few social work articles about rape used the ecological perspective, stating,

with social change as a tenet of the social work profession, efforts to influence the environmental, structural, and systemic factors that support or permit sexual violence are essential yet absent. Few articles addressed the need to prepare social workers to understand the significance of changing the environment that supports rape and other forms of violence (p. 260).

They argue for an increased attention to rape in social work research and literature, pointing out that most social workers will work with survivors of sexual assault at some point in their careers. They also conclude that social workers should be applying their person-in-environment ecological perspective to these issues in order to best address the societal factors that contribute to the high occurrence of rape and the traumatic impact on survivors. This study seeks to meet this charge, through an environmental approach to rape prevention that can encompass biological contributions. Leaving the history and theoretical framework of approaches to rape, attention will now turn to reviewing recent directions in sexual assault prevention and research specific to parents and the value of parental involvement.

Intervening Against Sexual Assault

Over the last twenty-five to thirty years, sexual assault-related interventions have shifted from working to reform perpetrators and aid survivors towards primary prevention, taking place before an assault has occurred (Campbell & Wasco, 2005; Clinton-Sherrod et al., 2009). The more recent half of that time has seen a shift away from focusing on assaults perpetrated by strangers and towards the statistical likelihood of sexual assaults and abuse committed by acquaintances and loved ones (Schewe, 2002). Instead of being something only women were taught to avoid and defend against, now “rape prevention programs increasingly target men at earlier developmental stages...” (Schewe, 2002, p. 263). As three decades of work can be better summarized and evaluated in a dissertation or monograph, this section will focus on relatively recent reviews and a few studies that suggest specific courses of action and highlight the importance of early intervention.

Elements of effective intervention. The three chapters specifically devoted to rape prevention in the excellent compendium *Preventing Violence in Relationships: Interventions Across the Life Span* (edited by Paul Schewe, 2002) suggest a number of guidelines and program elements that enhance effectiveness of anti-rape interventions. The most effective intervention programs were *theoretically informed*, meaning that content was designed to address the causes and risks for sexual assault, as explained by the particular theory in use (Schewe, 2002a). (When Weisz and Black [2009] evaluated effective dating violence and sexual assault interventions aimed at adolescents, they identified programs that used social learning, feminist, empowerment, and ecological systems theory, as well as combinations of these and other theories. However, they acknowledged that there were “many successful programs that are not grounded in a formal theoretical framework” [p. 24].) Useful content to teach about in a program (though not

necessarily all in the same program) includes challenges to perceptions about rape myths, gendered expectations, hypermasculization, and social norms, as well as the negative consequences of raping (Berkowitz, 2002; Schewe, 2002a; Ullman, 2002). For women specifically, teaching self-defense strategies, the social and psychological barriers to their use, and realistic high-risk situations seems to be helpful in avoiding and resisting rape though care must be taken to avoid the promotion of *victim-blaming* (Schewe, 2002a; Ullman, 2002). For men, programs should non-confrontationally emphasize men's responsibility to end and prevent rape, challenging the notion of it being a "women's issue;" one important element of this is including examples or narratives from male victims of sexual assault (Berkowitz, 2002; Schewe, 2002a). Message delivery should be formulated to decrease audience members' defensiveness, particularly men's, by holding single-sex groups and where subject-matter can be tailored to reach the age, race, gender, experience level and learning needs of the particular audience (Berkowitz, 2002; Clinton-Sherrod et al., 2009; Exner & Cummings, 2011; Schewe, 2002a). Primary and secondary school based interventions are more effective when programmers encourage and felicitate parental involvement (Weisz & Black, 2009).

A specific form of programming approach that combines many of the above-stated elements is known as *bystander intervention*. Bystander intervention programs are ecological in nature because they seek to engage whole communities to prevent and interrupt rape rather than putting responsibility solely on potential perpetrators or potential victims (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Foubert, Brasfield, Hill, & Shelley-Tremblay, 2011; McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Many barriers exist, however, to reaching the desired end result of students feeling that they are capable of intervening and motivated to do so, as well as to make the leap from intending to intervene to actually actively intervening as an engaged bystander (Exner & Cummings, 2011;

Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al, 2011; Gidycz et al., 2011; McMahon & Banyard, 2012). One of the most important factors in the intention and decision to act appears to be the potential interveners' belief that peers will support them if they act to challenge or stop sexually aggressive behavior (Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010; Gidycz et al., 2011). In a quantitative study conducted with 395 male college students, Brown and Messman-Moore (2010) found that participants' perceptions of how their peers viewed sexual assault exerted a greater influence over participants' willingness to intervene to stop a sexual assault than did their own personal beliefs. While personal beliefs (measured in part by rape myth acceptance, RMA) were also related to reported willingness to intervene, they did not play as large a role as perceived peer attitudes. Contextualizing their finding within sexual assault intervention programming, Brown et al. (2010) suggested how this information could shape prevention efforts:

It is known that men learn sexist beliefs and behaviors from their families, their peer groups, and from the dominant culture, and that these beliefs encourage some men to commit sexual violence and other men to passively permit sexual violence, even if they are not themselves violent (Katz, 2006; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). ...One promising aspect of the finding that perceived peer beliefs have a stronger influence than personal beliefs is that peer beliefs, being only perceived, may be more easily changed (p. 514).

They conclude that focusing on social or perceived norms is an effective prevention strategy.

Their argument is supported in McMahon and Banyard's (2012) critique of the current state of bystander intervention programs. Too often, these programs focus on the statistically less frequent situations where someone is presented with the opportunity to intervene at a time when a victim is at a high risk; they do not teach students as much about the opportunities to

intervene when confronted with behaviors at the “lower end” of the spectrum of sexual violence, nor why challenging others there, though no immediate risk of assault is present, is so vital (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). On college campuses, where the majority of this research has been centered, many students do not recognize or do not deem intervention-worthy behaviors on the “low end” of the spectrum and some fear peer rejection for speaking out (McMahon & Banyard, 2012).

Applying the position of conceptualizing sexual violence as existing on a continuum and that many people are likely to witness others making sexist jokes or statements that subtly (and sometimes overtly) support sexual violence, the authors liken such moments to racial *microaggressions*—the insidious, quotidian, often-unnoticed-by-the-dominant-culture expressions of racism that have taken the place of open expressions of racist thinking where it has become taboo—and the practice, advocated by anti-racism activists and allies, of interrupting and challenging these expressions in the moment (McMahon & Banyard, 2012; Miller & Garran, 2008). As with racist language and actions, when more people recognize and speak out against the component parts of the rape-supportive culture, the more social norms shift and those behaviors become less supported. In their evaluation of men’s bystander intervention program conducted among dormitory residents during the first year of college, Gidycz, Orchowski, and Berkowitz (2011) found that, compared with men in the control condition, men who underwent the program reported decreased association with sexually aggressive peers and less reinforcement for sexually aggressive behaviors at follow-ups. Thus a shift began in the social norms of that group. However, for bystander interventions to increase this effect and “create true change, rape prevention efforts must address all behaviors along the continuum,” (McMahon & Banyard, 2012, p. 6), meaning that potential bystanders need to be taught, motivated, and

supported to intervene against all words and actions that support sexual violence, even when no immediate danger is posed to a potential victim.

For all intervention programs, it is important to note that raising awareness and knowledge and encouraging attitude change does not equal and actually has little influence on behavior change (Schewe & Bennett, 2002), which remains the goal of these efforts. Effective intervention efforts need to foster change “on proxy measures of violence-related attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, behaviors, behavioral intentions, and skills” (Schewe, 2002, p. 265). One way of going about that is to intervene while all of those targets are in formative stages.

Towards early intervention and primary prevention. A seemingly promising way to focus early intervention efforts with school-age children is through targeting bullying behaviors. While the conceptual and theoretical link between perpetration of bullying and sexual assault has existed for a while, new empirical evidence has amassed to support the *bully-SV pathway*, by which childhood bullying (not necessarily sexual or gendered in nature) starts to present as “more gendered harassment and aggressive behavior in the form of homophobic teasing and sexual harassment,” usually around middle school (Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012, p. 64). Espelage, Basile, and Hamburger (2012) found evidence for such a pathway in the strong association of perpetration of bullying and homophobic teasing to later perpetration of sexual harassment.

This evidence suggests the importance of recognizing and addressing relationally violent behaviors as they begin to present themselves, such as in the forms of name-calling, sexual touching, and spreading rumors about a person’s sexual orientation or experience. Espelage, Basile, and Hamburger’s (2012) study also revealed an “overwhelming prevalence of verbally based SV perpetration among this young sample” (p. 65) committed by approximately a third of

both male and female students. Extrapolating from the results of other studies, the authors speculated that these behaviors increase in severity among boys as they age, leading from verbal to more extreme physical acts of sexual violence (p. 65). Though the authors point out that the empirical literature in this area is only in beginning stages, this study likely provides useful guidance to early intervention efforts aimed to interrupt and reduce bullying, particularly cross-gender bullying and same-gender *homophobic teasing*, to help reduce the likelihood of the behaviors continuing toward sexual assault perpetration.

Early intervention is further supported by White and Smith (2004), who found in their longitudinal study of male college students that men who perpetrated sexual assault as adolescents were more likely to perpetrate again as young adults. Men who experienced violence in their childhood (physical punishment, sexual abuse, and/or witnessing of domestic violence) were also more likely to perpetrate in high school, though men who had experienced violence but did not perpetrate in high school were not more likely than others to perpetrate once in college. Though the questions of what precursors exist for men who perpetrate rape in adolescence who do not have a childhood victimization history as well as for those who perpetrate in college but not in high school were identified by White and Smith as still unanswered, (though bullying behaviors would be a useful clue to watch for) the authors concluded strongly in favor of early intervention programs, calculating that “preventing adolescent perpetration would reduce collegiate victimization by about 25%” (p. 199).

Influence and Parents

This section integrates the assumptions in the design of this study with empirically supported data and theories. While the review of parental influence, a major topic of study and debate in its own right, is by no means comprehensive, efforts have been made to present a

contemporary snapshot of relevant subtopics that serves as a primer, encapsulating research both supportive and disconfirming of the premise of this study. Structurally, this section functions deductively, first addressing general questions of parents' influence on their children and then discussing the reasoning behind pursuing study of parents who work in sexual assault-related fields.

Parental and social influences on children. Perceived parental neglect and being the victim of or witnessing interfamilial violence are among the risk factors for male children and adolescents who perpetrate sexual coercion (Kjellgren, Priebe, Svedin & Långström, 2010; White & Smith, 2004). But that is not where parental and familial influence ends. Parents can have a highly protective and risk-reducing effect on their children (DeVore & Ginsburg, 2005; Stanton et al., 2004). This potential seems to have been recognized in the recently released National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey [NIPSVS] (Black et al., 2010), which suggested the following for policy makers:

Prevention efforts should start early by promoting healthy, respectful relationships in families by fostering healthy parent-child relationships and developing positive family dynamics and emotionally supportive environments. These environments provide a strong foundation for children, help them to adopt positive interactions based on respect and trust, and foster effective and non-violent communication and conflict resolution in their peer and dating relationships. It is equally important to continue addressing the beliefs, attitudes and messages that are deeply embedded in our social structures and that create a climate that condones sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence (p. 4).

Their position sounds sensible and addresses both mezzo (family-level) and macro (societal) dynamics, but what are the mechanisms that lead from healthy parent-child relationships to a reduction in levels of sexual violence? Because parental influence on children could be studied and measured from numerous starting points, this review will focus specifically on values transmission, protective factors against risk, and the development of empathy, as these particular issues have great pertinence to the question of how parenting techniques and the discourse parents create could form the basis of sexual assault prevention efforts. The role of peer group influence will also be discussed.

Values transmission. Though it is known that parents play a socializing role (Pagano, Hirsch, Deutsch, & McAdams, 2002; Taris, 2000) and figure strongly in their children's well-being (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000; van Wel, ter Bogt, & Raaijmakers, 2002), the extent of the influence through which parents shape their children's attitudes has long been contested within the literature about values transmission (McBroom, 1985; Thomas & Stankiewicz, 1974; Whitbeck & Gecas, 1988). Much of the research on parent-child agreement has focused on comparing familial factors such as warmth, permissiveness, communication style, and quality of interaction, to rates of attitudinal agreement about issues such as political and religious beliefs, sexual mores, and drug/alcohol use. While many assumed and searched for a correlation between family characteristics and the strength of parent-child values agreement, little evidence was found and what might seem like common sense assumptions about the strength of parents' influence in shaping their children's attitudes were called into question (Thomas & Stankiewicz, 1974). For example, Taris (2000), in a longitudinal study of the link between mothers' and adolescents sexual permissiveness, found that there was initially greater correspondence in families labeled as having "high quality parent-child interactions" and less in families whose

interactions were described “low quality”, but the longitudinal results did not support the hypothesis that mothers in the high quality category would have the strongest transmission of their values to their children.

A glimpse of the complex and multivariate factors affecting values transmission, and a possible reason why studies seeking direct correlations within the family and without a situational context so often come up without strong supporting evidence, is available in Whitbeck and Gecas’ (1988) review of the literature:

We think that parents’ values are an important influence on the development of children’s values. However, it is increasingly apparent that this influence is mediated, qualified, and otherwise affected by a host of variables and conditions, such as the degree of specificity or concreteness of the value or belief (Jennings and Niemi, 1968), the value’s salience for the parent (Jennings and Niemi, 1974; Tedin, 1974), the accuracy with which the value is perceived (Acock and Bengtson, 1980; Kerckhoff and Huff, 1974), the age of the child, the extent to which the child identifies with the parent (Acock and Bengtson, 1978), and various situational factors (see Smith, 1983) (p. 829).

These findings are in keeping with an ecological perspective which views children and parents, even when ostensibly alone together, as always interacting within multiple contexts and systems; that direct correlations of family characteristics and value concordance are elusive underlines the fact that families do not operate in a vacuum or laboratory. Barni, Ranieri, Scabini, and Rosnati, (2011) criticize values transmission research that frames parent-child value agreement as the only measure of successful values transmission, pointing out that the process is interactive and not analogous to a photocopy. In their study of 381 Northern Italian families with adolescents between 15 and 19-years-old, Barni et al. found a moderate correspondence between the values

of teens and their parents and noted that a perfect relationship would be highly unlikely for that age range and might indicate that adolescents' developmental task of individuation was not being met. A key factor in determining which values children shared with their parents was the accuracy of the child's perception of what it is the parent wants to transmit (Barni et al. 2011). Parents' explicit, clearly stated, and repeatedly communicated values were more likely to show a high degree of adoption by their offspring.

This finding brings to light another issue with much of the research into values transmission, especially those studies that purport to examine the impact of family communication on adolescents' sexual attitudes and behavior and have not found evidence of a link between communication and reduced sexual risk behavior (DeVore & Ginsburg, 2005). One problem is that these studies look at things such as *openness* and *frequency of communication*, but do not necessarily track the content of the communication. As Taris (2000) notes when reviewing the limitations of his study, described above, conclusions about attitude transmission and communication were drawn about a topic that many parents were unlikely to discuss frequently or openly with their children. However, as DeVore and Ginsburg (2005) point out, in a review of over forty empirical studies that demonstrate how good parenting is protective for adolescents, the two reviewed studies about *communication about sex* showed a link between greater communication and decreased sexual risk. Thus, while the general state of attitudes transmission research presents mixed to low findings for the strength of the influence of parental values, there is enough evidence to suggest that clear communication that enables the child to accurately perceive and engage with the parents' view is more likely to enhance transmission and can serve a protective function.

Protective factors against risk. Numerous studies underscore how parents can serve as buffers against risks in the lives of their children and adolescents, including mental health outcomes and decision-making (DeVore & Ginsburg, 2005; Helsen et al., 2000; Scheinberg, 1999; Stanton et al., 2004; Tanner, Carlson, Raymond, & Hopkins, 2008; van Wel, et al., 2002). A longitudinal survey study of Dutch teens and young adults (ages 12-24 at T1, with a final n=1078) measured parental bond, general well being, and friendship (van Wel et al., 2002); at all three time points, parental bond was seen to have a positive influence on the child's well-being. DeVore and Ginsburg (2005) compiled evidence of how parents function as protective figures for adolescents. Their review of recent empirical studies cited parental qualities such as authoritative style, monitoring, communication, and supervision as significantly reducing the likelihood of teens' participation in risky behaviors, such as substance use and unprotected sex. Parental monitoring is defined as both communication and supervision, and appears to be a key source of protection for teenagers (DeVore et al., 2005; Stanton et al., 2004). Stanton et al. (2004) conducted a longitudinal study of 817 low-income African-American youth (starting at ages 13-16) in a risk-reduction intervention program. While the intervention was provided for all youth, those whose parents participated in a one-time intervention aimed at increasing parental monitoring capabilities displayed lower risk behaviors at the two-year follow up. The parental monitoring intervention produced a significant effect in reducing adolescents' involvement in risky behaviors, prompting the researchers to advocate for "...the importance of looking to parents in our efforts to minimize risk exposure among adolescents. Parents really do make a difference in the lives of their adolescents" (Stanton et al., 2004, p. 955).

Writing about risk perception as it applies to sexual assault, Nurius (2000) discusses how, in general, individual perception of risk is low, and that people tend to be overly optimistic

and assess themselves as able to control situations. Because risky situations for acquaintance sexual assault (such as parties and dates) are usually normal situations where people's main goals are to socialize and have fun, cognitive processing in these situations is typically automatic, as opposed to deliberative, and biased toward a positive interpretation, even if, in a different situation, the same cues could be interpreted as threatening. While long-term memory holds the information about risk and danger cues, it is not typically brought up to working memory. However, "interventions designed to increase perceived susceptibility by decreasing optimism, positive self-regard, and perceived control run the risk of eroding a significant mental health asset and fostering a dangerous combination of high fear and low perceived self efficacy" (Nurius, 2000, p. 67). Thus, combating this effect through maximizing a person's sense of risk is not a helpful intervention.

Although Nurius (2000) does not discuss parents, her work lends theoretical support and guidance to the role of parents. One of parents' major tasks is dialectical in nature—teaching children how to navigate safely through the world and all its risks while simultaneously protecting them from harm and helping them to feel efficacious (the secure base that allows them to explore). Parents' involvement, as described above, is effective in helping children recognize and minimize their participation in risky behaviors. As parents are generally already working to help their children recognize and minimize risk yet still be able to face the world without overwhelming fear, they have developed many of the skills that would be desired of sexual assault prevention educators.

Development of empathy. Parents play a large role in the development of their children's conceptualization of themselves and others, key factors in feminist and social constructionist theories of rape and the rape supportive culture. The ability to understand and feel others'

emotions, empathy, is vital to the development of prosocial behavior, such as helping to intervene to prevent a sexual assault or supporting a victim, and is related to parenting characteristics such as attunement and affective expression (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2011; Strayer & Roberts, 2004).

Swick (2005) discusses a model developed by Goldman (1995) describing two necessary components for children's development of empathy—"self-awareness" and "self-other relational awareness" (p. 54). The model starts with self-awareness, knowledge of one's own feelings, without which empathy cannot develop. Children learn to understand, value and manage their own feelings through loving experiences with adults who look after their safety and help them to regulate emotions, services ideally provided by their parents or primary caretakers (Swick, 2005). When self-awareness is achieved it can then be extended outward into self-other relational awareness. This second dimension of empathy development is characterized by the ability to understand others' feelings by applying knowledge of how oneself might feel in the other person's situation. This understanding spurs action, such as comforting a distressed peer or seeking to find adult help.

Individuals low in empathy, often due to a chronic atmosphere of familial maltreatment, "do not develop the emotional alarm system that warns people of danger or harm. Nor do they exhibit concern over how their behavior might impact others" (Swick, 2005). Lack of an emotional alarm system could put an individual at increased risk for becoming a victim of sexual assault, while a disregard for how one's actions affect others is understood to be a component of anti-social behavior, including perpetrating interpersonal violence (Malamuth, Heavey & Linz, 1993; Schaffer, Clark, & Jeglic, 2009). Ellis (1993), offering a biological explanation, suggests that high levels of male sex hormones decrease sensitivity to others' suffering and that this is

“directly associated with the probability of sexual assault” (p. 26). From the understanding that empathy spurs action to relieve pain—both the pain of the other person and the pain of the self incurred in witnessing another person in pain—it is not surprising that the activation of empathy is a vital component of prevention work (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2011; Swick, 2005).

This logic is supported by empirical studies about rape and empathy as well as existing rape prevention programming. Low empathy and acceptance of violence against women are two of the factors that have been identified as common characteristics of men who rape (Abbey, 2005). Increasing empathy for victims of rape is endorsed as a target for effective sexual assault prevention and bystander intervention programs (with the caveat that male audiences be provided with at least one example of a male victim to whom they could relate, as these efforts can otherwise produce an unintended effect of increasing rape acceptance) (Berkowitz, 2002; Schewe, 2002a). Combining this data with what is known about how parents can support their child’s empathic development, one finds many reasons for pursuing the current course of investigation.

Peers, not parents. In an age when multiple products claim to raise infants’ intelligence and private nursery schools advertise the number of alumni admitted into Ivy League universities, there is a very understandable and necessary critique of the idea that parents can engineer their children to be a certain way. Pinker (2002) vigorously critiques “the effects of upbringing in childhood” in determining personality and intellect, arguing that genes and the unique environment (influences outside of the home, such as peer group) account for all the variations among family members (though he notes that most studies of sibling variability are conducted in middle class families and that they exclude children with traumatic experiences such as child abuse and neglect) (p. 381). Parents matter, he argues, but mostly in keeping

children safe and in selecting the environment in which the children develop; peers are where socialization occurs (Harris, 1998, cited by Pinker).

So how do parents matter, and do they matter as much as peers? The answer to that question, if indeed it is something that can be quantified, is outside the bounds of this paper. Returning to the mindset of synthesis, one can acknowledge that there are important roles for both. The authors of a quantitative study of 2589 Dutch teenagers reported that adolescence brings about a shift in levels of seeking support from parents and peers, heading toward equal levels (whereas younger children seek more support from parents) (Helsen et al., 2000). However, the more parental support the adolescents indicated corresponded with fewer emotional problems. A study of college men found that their perceptions of how their peers viewed sexual assault exerted a greater influence over participants' willingness to intervene to stop a sexual assault than did their own personal beliefs (Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010). Gidycz, Orchowski, and Berkowitz (2011), also found that the influence of peers is key to behavior change; without the belief that peers will be supportive of one's interventions against sexual violence, it is unlikely that many men will act as intervening bystanders.

If peer influence is stronger than that of parents, there remains the possibility that parents who create a discourse about sexual assault with their children are helping to protect them against risk and possibly sending out young people into the world who are committed to promoting a culture free of sexual violence, a commitment with which they might influence their peers for the better. Peers *and* parents *and* the culture, media, politics, biology, etc. are all interacting and all important. Parental influence and actions remain an important factor, worthy of study. We turn now to the particular group of parents chosen for this research, and how their work influences the ways they raise their children.

Influences on parents who work in sexual assault-related fields. It is well established that working in trauma-related fields, as the parents who qualify for this study do, impacts one's attitudes, lifestyle, behavior choices, and in many cases, own mental health (see a review in Allen, 2001). In a qualitative study of experienced, female social workers working with survivors and perpetrators of relationship violence, Goldblatt, Buchbinder, Eisikovits, and Arizon-Mesinger (2009) demonstrated how the professional work catalyzed a series of changes in the workers' private lives and ultimately "becomes a lens through which the workers reflect on their intimate relationships, their family, and life in general" (p. 378). Clemans (2004) conducted a qualitative study of female rape-crisis center workers to gain perspective into their experience. In her literature review, she summarized what is known about crisis center work as:

1. Workers in rape-crisis programs experience a range of complex emotional, spiritual, and physical reactions to their jobs.
2. Rape-crisis work is more than a job; it affects workers' personal relationships, view of the world, and perceptions of safety and vulnerability as women.
3. Because women as a group are vulnerable to sexual assault, the workers cannot easily separate their workday exposure to rape from their personal lives (149).

Eight of the 21 women Clemans interviewed were parents, with the conclusion that "their normal parental worries intensified" as a result of their profession (p. 153). The article describes how the mothers in the study reported feeling more protective of their children and more aware and fearful that their children could be harmed. Only one summarizing paragraph and one quote were devoted to the influence of parenting, and did not explore the influence of the work on parenting other than the increased fear of harm. While Clemans' study confirms that the work

impacts parents' attitudes, its brevity in regard to this issue leaves open far more to be discovered.

Internalizing work experiences and social identity. Extrapolating from the findings that the world view, self-concept, and relationships of workers are changed by involvement in sexual assault-related fields, I propose conceptualizing sexual assault awareness through involvement in the work as functioning like or even constituting a *targeted social identity*, possibly a subset of gender identity that is not restricted to those who identify as female. Without in any way or form meaning to suggest that the work is as salient to or shapes peoples' lives as much as or in the same way as race, class, religious affiliation or the other well established categories, this conceptualization is a helpful way of acknowledging and categorizing the many effects that involvement in this work has on people.

This conceptualization could also explain, at least by analogy, why and how parents in this field approach the topic of sexual assault with their children. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, Pagano, Hirsch, Deutsch and McAdams (2002) explored the role of race and gender in parenting practices, asking if the social identities (privileged or targeted) of the parents had an effect on what type of values they sought to instill in their children. While the study focused mainly on how parents teach children about social concern, other-orientation and individualism, as well as the themes of religion, hardship, and education, the findings and design lend support to the premise of the current study. Noting that African American parents and White mothers were significantly more likely to express other-oriented themes than White fathers, the authors suggest that the experience of having one or more targeted social identities could be responsible: "Those for whom society has posed barriers to, rather than opportunities for, social mobility may incorporate social concerns into their own sense of identity and value

system and pass these on to the next generation” (Pagano et al., 2002, p. 31). Parents who work in sexual assault related fields, aware of the barriers to safety and health that sexual assault poses to people of all genders, could incorporate this awareness into their sense of identity and, through their parenting, attempt to pass down to their children values to help them navigate safely through an unsafe world and to combat the social forces that contribute to its risks.

Involving parents in interventions. Some areas of the sexual assault prevention and response literature have started to pay attention to parents and involve them in their analyses and interventions. Testa et al. (2010) created a randomized controlled trial among college-bound female students and their mothers, with two groups of mothers receiving a booklet with information about alcohol use, sexual assault, and effective communication, with the instruction to discuss these issues with their daughters. They found that the “parent-based intervention ... can reduce the high rates of sexual victimization that continue to be reported by college age women” (p. 317). They also discuss how open communication with mothers is beneficial to daughters’ wellbeing, a finding that supports the work of Smith and Cook (2008). These authors found that college women who disclosed their experience of sexual assault victimization to their parents were more like to have been raised in a home atmosphere that promoted rather than inhibited discussion of sexuality. While Smith and Cook refer to how the home messages may impact a daughter’s actions following a sexual assault, one could apply the same reasoning to question how the messages a child receives at home affects his or her behavior prior to a possible sexual assault. Indeed, in likening the conversation to those that parents have with their children about other major health risks, Smith and Cook suggest that parental guidance could have a preventative effect:

Major media campaigns encourage parents to talk to their teens about smoking, alcohol, and drugs, but few to none encourage parents to discuss the possibility of sexual assault, especially by acquaintances. Future efforts should focus on building the skills of parents to talk with their teens about both healthy sexual relationships and unhealthy ones. We acknowledge that such discussions are not easy. However, it may not be necessary for parents to engage in open discussions of sexuality. Instead, it may be sufficient for parents to initiate discussions of unwanted sexual attention, consent, personal boundaries, and what to do if those boundaries are violated...” (Smith & Cook, 2008, p. 1345).

As seen in the studies discussed above that highlighted the protective effects of parental monitoring, Smith and Cook’s suggestion for future efforts has strong potential (DeVore et al., 2004; Stanton et al., 2005).

Summary

This literature review presented historical and theoretical ways of viewing sexual assault, as well as how they all have changed in response to challenges and knowledge from new data and different ways of thinking. An ecological framework that is highly influenced by feminism and social constructionism but which maintains a biopsychosocial approach to the study of rape was chosen as the backbone for this study in order to provide the most opportunity for approaching effective prevention. Whether a discourse about sexual assault between parent and child could impact any biological factors related to rape is outside of the scope of this study, as is any evaluation of the effectiveness of such a discourse. However, this broad theoretical framework is likely a useful one for the field to adopt.

Because no studies were found that have previously explored the discourse parents in sexual assault related fields create with their own children, or, indeed, if they even do so, the

literature from a number of fields was compiled to present evidence for the utility of such an exploration. Boiled down, the logic flows thus: effective primary prevention is the current goal of those seeking to end sexual assault. Parental involvement can have risk-reducing effects on children and is a beneficial ingredient to school-based sexual assault prevention efforts. Parents in the field are likely to be influenced by their work, up to and including feeling transformed by their experience and considering it part of their identity. Parents tend to try to transmit values to their children related to their own identity and values, especially if they are ones that are impacted or threatened by the dominant society. Thus, it is likely that parents are creating some kind of discourse already. This discourse is worthy of study, as it could offer guidance to shape new efforts at primary prevention.

It is my hope that the reader, informed by this data, will agree that looking to the actions of this specialized group of parents is a worthwhile enterprise that will inform us about these parents' experiences and could potentially guide future primary prevention efforts. Paul Schewe (2002), whose work provided many of the cornerstones upon which this study is based, eloquently expressed many of the points I attempted to convey in this review of the literature:

The devastation that occurs when people are physically, emotionally, or sexually violated by someone they trust screams out for primary prevention as the only solution to this problem. However, efforts to prevent individuals from becoming violent will truly be effective only when the pathological social climate that perpetuates violence is replaced with strong proscriptions against violence at every level within every system in society. (p. 264).

“Every level within every system” is a tall order, but one that nonetheless demands action. This study seeks to meet that charge on the parental level of the family system.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This study explores the discourse that parents who work in sexual assault-related fields create with their own children about sexual assault. Qualitative methods were selected as the basis for the study's design for several reasons. First, the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of these parents' subjective experience and understanding of how they conceptualize and go about raising their children in light of the specialized knowledge and awareness they have developed through their chosen work. Such an endeavor is best supported by a qualitative approach that "emphasizes the need for developing many concepts and their linkages in order to capture a great deal of the variation that characterizes the central phenomena studied..." (Strauss, 1987, p. 7). Discourse is complex and interpersonal, the combined communication of two or more people engaged with a topic; for the purposes of this study, discourse is defined as the ongoing approach to and communication about a topic, including nonverbal and behavioral communications in addition to language usage. A qualitative design provides for the most flexibility in engaging with this subject in its complexity and context.

Further support for a qualitative design for this project was due to the original nature of the research question. An extensive search of the literature revealed no pre-existing studies of this topic, suggesting that it represents a gap in the literature and thus, many unknowns. Deductive reasoning, which is typically carried out through the quantitative analysis of data, and which tests hypotheses in order to produce and refine knowledge, would be difficult to apply in

this context, as there is little to no preexisting data or theories upon which to base said hypotheses. The inductive approach, most often achieved through a qualitative methodology, “refers to the actions that lead to discovery of an hypothesis” and thus is a fitting way to open up un- and under-developed topics, such as the current study (Strauss, 1987, p. 11). The methods of grounded theory offer “flexible, successive analytic strategies for constructing inductive theories from the data” (Charmaz and Henwood, 2008, p. 240, as cited in Frost et al., 2010). For these reasons, grounded theory is the methodology of choice for this study.

While an understanding of how parents in sexual assault-related fields create a discourse around sexual assault with their own children will in itself contribute to increased phenomenological knowledge, the overarching purpose of this project is in service of the larger goal of sexual assault prevention. The first step, undertaken in this study, is to learn about what, if anything, members within this specific group of parents are already saying and doing, how and if their vocational knowledge is applied or transmitted through their child-rearing practice. Subsequent research, applying mixed and quantitative methods, could continue this inquiry and move it closer to the goal of sexual assault prevention by measuring how many parents actively seek to make sexual assault prevention a component of their childrearing; the effectiveness of such early, home-based interventions; and by developing a curriculum or set of guidelines that could be taken up by parents whose profession or interests do not bring them into daily engagement with the topic. This study and its qualitative approach are envisioned as the initial step of a larger project that will eventually employ multiple forms of qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Sample

My study population is composed of adults with at least two years of professional or volunteer experience working on sexual assault prevention efforts, such as educators and researchers, and/or in response to occurrences of sexual assault, such as therapists, advocates, and crisis center staff, who started working in the field by or before at least one of their children reached the age of ten and who at the time of the study have a child ten or older. This population was chosen because it could be reasonably assumed that they qualified as having “high-awareness” of issues relating to sexual assault and rape and that they attained that status while still raising their children. Upon the suggestions of my research advisor and Human Subjects Review Committee members, I limited the current age range of participants’ children to that of age ten and above, whereas it was originally conceived of being open to parents whose children ranged from age three to 18. This narrowing of criteria was established to increase the comparability of the resultant data, though parents with children under the age of ten could still qualify for participation as long as at least one of their children had reached that age. While the scope, expected sample size, and feasibility concerns of this project necessitated limiting the sample size in this way, it is in no way meant to imply that studying the discourse about sexual assault that parents of younger children create would be any less helpful or illuminating; indeed, the more we can learn about how the parents of very young children go about this task, the more potential understanding we can gain about effective early intervention.

In the present investigation, people interested in participating in the research were asked to complete a short screening questionnaire that was either self-administered and returned to the researcher via email or fax or completed orally over the phone (Appendix A). Respondents who

answered yes to all the following statements were informed that they qualified for participation in the study:

- I am the parent of at least one child over the age of ten. (Yes/No)
- I am an active participant in my child's upbringing. (Yes/No)
- I consider sexual assault to be or have been a primary focus of my work, such that:
 - Sexual assault is an area of professional interest and expertise. (Yes/No)
 - I have at least two years experience working with issues of sexual assault prevention and/or response (volunteer work included) as a therapist, advocate, researcher, educator, prevention specialist and/or crisis line respondent.
(Yes/No)
- My work in sexual assault started before or while at least one of my children reached age ten. (Yes/No)

No attempts at independent verification of participants' screening responses were made and, unless potential participants contacted me with any specific questions related to the participation criteria, I allowed for people to determine for themselves the operational definitions of the qualification statements. At least 12 people who expressed interest in participating screened themselves out (and potentially more people who did not qualify simply did not return the screening form). People who identified as living outside of the United States were also screened out, to facilitate ease of scheduling interviews.

As there was no clear way of finding out how many people currently alive in the United States meet the above qualifications, only nonprobability sampling was possible, an acceptable and frequently used methodology for qualitative studies (Rubin and Babbie, 2010). A final sample of 16 participants (five men and 11 women) were selected for and agreed to interviews

from among the 28 people who both completed the screening form and returned a signed copy of the informed consent.

Recruitment. Prior to recruitment efforts, approval for the study and the safeguards made to ensure that it met all ethical standards were obtained from the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review (HSR) Committee (Appendix B). Various methods were used to recruit participants, specifically snowballing, availability, and purposive. Employing snowball and purposive methods, I first asked prominent professionals and acquaintances and in the field to participate and to pass along my information to contacts they have in professional networks (Appendix C). I also emailed a local rape crisis center as well as a member of my state's coalition against sexual assault. These personal and "cold-contact" methods initially received mixed results. However, unanticipated reach for my recruitment materials was made possible when a major figure in the field of sexual assault prevention took an interest in the study and sent out the request for participants over three list serves that have a combined membership of nearly 1,000 recipients. I paused recruitment efforts after that due to the volume of emails and calls I received from people interested in participating in order to focus primarily on scheduling and conducting interviews.

Once participants returned their completed screening forms to me, I sent the Informed Consent (Appendix D) and a preview list of the interview questions (Appendix E) to those who qualified, in the format that they indicated they preferred in the screener (email, fax, or through the mail). When I first sent these out, I explained that I would need a returned signed copy of the consent in order to schedule an interview. I also explained that due to the enthusiastic response I would unfortunately not have a chance to interview everyone who returned the consent and that from that pool I would use purposive methods to select a sample that was representative of

gender (both of the participants and of their children) as well as age of children. As I did not have demographic information about participants' racial identity at that point in the process, I was not able to use purposive methods to select for racial diversity; however, if a participant had voluntarily identified their racial identity when contacting me, as a few did, I factored that information into the sample selection.

Whether due to normal attrition or because of my acknowledgement that more people were responding than I would be able to interview, which I omitted in subsequent emails in which I sent out consent forms, of the 59 people who returned their qualified screeners for the study and were sent Informed Consents, only 28 returned the signed consents. From this group, I contacted 18 parents and interviewed 16 of them, between February 25, 2012 and April 27, 2012. After conducting only two interviews with men during the first month and a half, I resumed recruitment efforts that specifically sought men and was able to interview three more, bringing up the total to five. Interviews ranged in length from about 40 to 90 minutes, with most interviews lasting between 45 minutes to an hour.

Risks and benefits of participation. The Informed Consent detailed the nature and purpose of the interviews to potential participants, who were also provided with a preview of the interview questions so that they would have a sense for the content. Because this list was provided to people beforehand, and because the questions were designed to only inquire as to the influence of the participant's professional experience within the field, and not seek out information about any personal experiences, risks for participation were classified as minimal.

Benefits of participation included advancing the knowledge of a field to which participants belonged and could reasonably be considered a passion or at least interest of theirs. As trauma work is very demanding and is well known to carry risks of vicarious traumatization

to those who engage in it professionally (Allen, 2001), it is likely that workers who remain in the field are sustained by a sense of commitment and strong belief in the importance of their work. A chance to contribute to the field as well as to talk about their experience within it and how it influences their life and parenting could feel validating and possibly rewarding. Other benefits included possible personal gain through the opportunity to reflect on how one's professional work informs one's parenting. Through participating, subjects had an opportunity to share their take on how to raise safe, healthy children, with the additional benefit of potentially improving on current sexual assault prevention efforts.

Data Collection

Narrative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted over the phone (speaker phone and/or Google Voice) and recorded as podcasts through GarageBand, a music writing and recording program that comes standard on Apple computers. The recordings were then loaded into the free downloadable version of ExpressScribe, a dictation software that makes it possible to change the speed of playback and use keyboard controls to play and pause the recording. Thorough and complete transcription of the entire recorded interview (with names and locations redacted) was chosen over selective transcription to provide full access to the data. I transcribed the majority of the interviews personally, with the remaining interviews transcribed by three assistants who signed an HSR-approved confidentiality pledge. I reviewed each interview transcribed by an assistant for accuracy.

Demographic data (including participants' age, gender and racial identities, state of residence, and highest academic degree completed) was collected at the beginning of the interview before the recording was turned on and written down by the researcher on a separate form that can be matched to the corresponding interview recording through a unique code

assigned to each participant. To ensure confidentiality, all names of participants, their children, or geographic locations were redacted from interview transcriptions. The informed consent forms of the people who have participated in interviews were stored separately from the completed interviews in a locked cabinet.

I developed the interview questions in response to my own engagement with the field of sexual assault and the extant literature, as well as in consultation with my research methods professor, research advisor, and the suggestions of the HSR committee. I also pilot-tested an early round of the questions with a colleague who was willing to provide feedback, both about the clarity of the questions and her subjective experience during the interview, which was used to further refine the questions asked. The interview questions were designed with process theory in mind, seeking to explore the meaning, context and process of the respondents' parenting philosophy (Maxwell, 2005). Roughly, the questions can be broken down into the categories of: I. Navigation of professional and parenting roles; II. Gender roles; III. Attitudes. However, many of the questions fit into more than one category, and redundancy of the questions was also made part of the design. I made a concerted effort in my phrasing of the interview questions to minimize the possibility of participants feeling judged or of slanting their responses in the interests of social desirability. A full list of the interview questions and contingent follow-ups is included in Appendix F. While self-developed interviews always run a greater risk of bias than pre-established measures, they are particularly helpful in exploring a subject or phenomenon that has not yet been addressed within the literature. Semi-structured, open-ended interview questions also provided both researcher and participants with flexibility in approaching and developing a narrative.

Data Analysis

Because of the potentially identifying nature of the demographic data collected, it was simply analyzed with descriptive statistics that reported the aggregated gender identity breakdown, age range, racial identities, age and gender of participants' children, and general type of related work experiences.

Participants' narratives were analyzed mainly with grounded theory methodology (Frost et al., 2010; Strauss, 1987; Rubin & Babbie, 2010). Codes were formulated through close readings of complete transcriptions of each participant's interview. Three interviews were selected to generate an initial list of codes, completed independently by this writer and my research advisor, a psychologist, providing an opportunity for partial *analytic triangulation* and *interdisciplinacy triangulation* (Padgett, 2008). We then compared our readings of these texts and the proposed codes in an effort to strengthen the reliability and decrease bias in the analysis. Having found agreement in our interpretations of the text, I worked from and added to this initial list of codes when analyzing the remaining 13 interviews. All interviews were read multiple times as codes were generated, modified, and/or discarded.

Following the open coding procedure described above, codes were divided into four sections that provided information about *what, how, why, and reflection about the issues*, with some codes fitting into two or more of these sections. Within each section (which each became a separate subheading of the findings chapter) axial (comparative) analysis was then applied to group the codes into themes. Commonly occurring, stand alone, or seemingly highly significant codes could attain theme status, whereas some others that, after axial analysis, appeared to exist in relationship with each other were often subsumed into a group or overarching theme. In the process of illustrating each theme, I created a large number of separate documents with excerpts

of text with the corresponding codes. Color-coding was used to at times with these texts to determine to which section of the findings they were most appropriate. While I used word processing programs to organize and assist my coding, I did not use any qualitative data analysis programming, which might have been helpful to this project. My use of various Microsoft Word documents was similar in method to manual filing folders, just without requiring so much space or paper.

Through open coding followed by axial coding, memoing (in the form of writing up themes and collecting narratives excerpts), and then formal writing formed the general steps within the process of data analysis, it was very much an iterative and non-linear process, with a frequent re-examination of meanings, relationships, significance, and optimal presentation to ensure clarity and minimize bias. This form of *constant comparative analysis* was used to search for similarities and differences throughout the data. However, the methods of grounded theory were not applied in isolation. While grounded theory seeks to be “faithful to the everyday reality of the phenomenon under investigation” (Frost et al., 2010, p. 443), which I found appealing as a way to honor the narratives participants shared with me, there is precedent for combining two or more qualitative methodologies as a way to increase a study’s robustness, ability to make meaning from the data, transparency of the researcher, and validity (Frost et al., 2010). As such, elements that are more common to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) were also used, particularly a reflexive stance that acknowledges the impact of the researcher and the researcher’s position in the interpretation and analysis of the data (Frost et al., 2010).

I believe this acknowledgement of my position to be particularly important in my case as a student researcher previously inexperienced in qualitative methodology; while I sought to

employ grounded theory methods, my lack of technical know-how likely impacted the accuracy of the data as well as my ability to carry out the methodology with fidelity, and at a minimum likely decreased the amount and fullness of data that I was able to pull from the narratives. Time constraints also made a “pure” grounded theory methodology difficult to attain in this project, as I was not able to use selective sampling (such as actively seeking out participants who might provide disconfirming data) to reach theoretical saturation (Strauss, 1987). Bringing in a reflexive practice (Anderson & Doherty, 1997; Frost et al., 2010) increases transparency about my function as a filter of the data, to its benefit and detriment.

This study also fits within the auspices of feminist research action methods, in that I am attempting to learn about data that has the potential to positively impact women (and men), and it is my intention to make the results available so that they can have an impact on policy and practice (Rubin and Babbie, 2010).

Limitations And Biases

The current study includes multiple limitations and areas of potential bias. All qualitative research grapples with certain threats to trustworthiness, including *reactivity*, the “potentially distorting effect of the researcher’s presence on participants’ beliefs and behaviors,” *researcher bias*, when interpretations are impacted by the researcher’s emotions, opinions and preconceptions, and *respondent bias*, which includes factors such as the impact of social desirability and the potential for faulty recall (Padgett, 2008, p. 184). This section will explore where aspects of this study were particularly vulnerable to these three threats as well as efforts taken to counteract them.

As mentioned earlier, my inexperience as a researcher increases the likeliness of unwittingly biasing the conduction of the interviews and the data analysis, though even an

experienced researcher still grapples with this issue. Qualitative research recognizes the experiences of the researcher, both professional and personal, as factoring into the data analysis (Strauss, 1987). My professional contribution, in the sense of prior experience with qualitative methods, is a negative one; my inexperience limits my ability to engage with all of the information potentially available within the narratives. However, my personal experience of working within the field of sexual assault has been a tool that I have utilized throughout the course of the study, from generating the research and interview questions to analyzing the data.

While use of self can be a strength, particularly in the sense of connecting empathically with the narratives, a cornerstone of IPA (Frost et al., 2010), it is also a source of potential researcher bias, particularly if I left unexamined the assumptions I made in designing this study. For example, my personal experience and my knowledge of the literature inspired me to develop the particular set of interview questions used in the study and thus to address what I consider to be an important gap in the literature. Though I attempted to include many open-ended questions and made sure to always conclude interviews by asking if there was anything parents thought was relevant to their discourse about sexual assault or wanted to share about their experience that we had not previously discussed, it is possible that the questions asked shaped participants' responses in a certain way or could be subtly working to confirm my own expectations for the data. Special attention was paid to divergent data in the form of *negative case analysis* to counteract these expectations, though data that was disconfirming of the general premise that parents in this field create a discourse with their children about sexual assault or that they are influenced by the work was not found in participants' narratives. However, variations in the discourses as well as the concerns a few parents presented about the possible negative effects on children were emphasized in the findings as a form of countering researcher bias. By keeping all

of my notes from the interviews, complete transcriptions, and memos, I have created an *auditing trail* to enhance reproducibility and so that other researchers would be able to assess and interpret my process.

Another potential source of limitation was through the exclusive use of over-the-phone interviews. As prolonged contact with research participants was not possible during this study, participant reactivity potentially impacted the answers given (Padgett, 2008). Additionally, whereas face-to-face interaction allows for the full range of communicative gestures and cues to be observed, only verbal communications are available for interpretation over the phone. Quality of the phone connection, reactions to voice and tone, and potential misinterpretation of meaning due to this limited context could have affected both participants and myself during the interview.

Sample limitations. As a relatively small sample of a self-selected and highly motivated group (potential participants completed multiple steps in order to qualify for and schedule an interview), the sample is likely not representative of the general population of parents within the United States and may or may not be transferable to all parents who work in sexual assault related fields. Some racial and gender diversity was achieved in the sample (five participants identified as male, five participants identified as non-White) but it is not known how well the sample reflects the gender and racial make-up of the field. Only two of the people personally recruited by the researcher to participate in the study became part of the sample. All other participants were recruited to the study through an announcement that got passed on through list serves and snowball recruitment. Access to list serves and an endorsement of the study were generously provided by a major researcher in the field, and the high response rate to the initial

query was likely boosted by this researcher's endorsement. The effects of this type of recruitment on sample representativeness are not clear.

Validity. Participants were asked to recall conversations and approaches from throughout their parenting career, so it is possible that they might provide different anecdotes or examples of conversations during different interviews, though it is unlikely that the general gist of what they were saying would change significantly. Participants might have interpreted interview questions to mean certain things because of the wording that was not necessarily intended by the researcher. For instance, the question "how do you talk or demonstrate to your child/children about gender, both their own gender and other genders?" was posed as such so as not to perpetuate a gender binary. However, participants might have heard that question as seeking out information about whether they and their children have discussed what it means to be transgender or to identify outside of a gender binary and answered as such. This example demonstrates how interview questions might have biased or shaped participants' answers.

To minimize researcher bias, findings are mainly presented in descriptive form of who participated, what constituted their discourse with their children about sexual assault, how they enacted it, why they did so, and the complexities and issues reflected. While these general categories reflect my interpretation as researcher, they were arrived at through grounding in the narratives rather than as *a priori* decision about how to organize the findings. Multiple examples from the narratives are provided with each point to allow the reader as much direct access to the texts as possible. Readers are welcome and encouraged to bring their own analysis to the findings presented.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The major findings were that parents who work or have experience in a sexual assault-related field do create a discourse with their children about sexual assault and believe that their work has been very influential in how they raised or are raising their children. While a wide majority of participants created discourse with their children that involved frequent and age-appropriate, accurate discussions of sexual assault, sex, gender, and safety, the specificity, frequency, and emphasis within those topics did range among participants. Fourteen of the participants confirmed outright that they had engaged in direct conversations with their children about sexual assault. The other two parents, both of whose children were over 18 and no longer living at home, stated they had difficulty recalling if or how they had had these conversations, but later on in the course of the interview stated “perhaps it [a discussion] was directly about sexual assault” and “I think we may have some on and off kind of conversations, but we don’t have like the sit down ... half-an-hour talk.” After analysis of these two parents’ narratives, it seems that they both spoke less frequently and explicitly about sexual assault within their discourses with their children, but heavily emphasized related topics such as safety, violence prevention, feminist values about gender, and healthy relationships. In line with the conceptualization of sexual assault as a spectrum of behaviors enabled and perpetuated by a rape-supportive culture, all parents presented a spectrum within their own discourses of how they

addressed issues related and potentially leading up to sexual assault. For example, one father stated:

I think that the way that his mother and I both talked to him a lot was trying to deal with values in particular ways and it generally didn't need to get to the point of talking about sexual assault because it was much more about simple respect and support and cooperation.

This quote exemplifies why what is considered a “discourse about sexual assault” within this study is broadly defined; as the reader will see, there are many ways parents translated their knowledge of the field into their child-rearing. This chapter will explore the contents and contours of these discourses as they emerged through open and axial coding of the participants' narrative responses to semi-structured interviews.

For clarity of presentation, the findings have been organized into the following categories: demographic information about who participated (both the parents interviewed and the ages and genders of their children), what they reported saying to their children (*Components of the Discourse*), how they said it (*Enacting the Discourse*), and why they did so (*The Reasons for a Discourse*). Participants' reflections about their experience creating this discourse are then presented in a section titled *The Good, The Bad, and The Complex*.

Demographics

Eleven women and five men (n=16) completed interviews lasting 40-75 minutes between February 25th and April 27th, 2012. At the time of the interview, the oldest participant was 58 and the youngest was 37; eleven participants were in their 40s. A majority of participants (n=11) identified as either *Caucasian* or *White*. The remaining five participants stated their racial identity as *Asian*, *Biracial Asian and Caucasian*, *Hispanic*, *Mixed White and Native American*,

and *Native American and Mexican American*. Participants were geographically diverse, reporting the following states of residence, with one participant from each state unless otherwise indicated: Alaska, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts (n=2), New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon (n=2), Pennsylvania, Washington (n=2), Wisconsin, and Wyoming. In terms of highest completed academic degree, participants reported High School Diploma (n=1), Associate's (n=1), Bachelor's (n=3), Master's (n=9) and Doctorate (n=2).

Asked to indicate which of the following positions they identified as, with the option to choose as many as apply, participants reported Advocate (n=11), Crisis-line Respondent (n=9), Educator (n=13), Prevention Specialist (n=10), Researcher (n=2), and Therapist (N=5). One participant chose five of the labels, seven participants identified with four of the labels, three with three, three with two, and two with one. One of the two participants who identified with just one of the categories (educator) specified that she was involved in the field as a clinician—forensic nurse—as well.

Three participants identified as single parents and one of the participants who identified as a co-parent added that she was “no longer married.” All the parents indicated that the relationships they had been in when having children were heterosexual. Participants listed a combined total of 47 children (including non-biological children whom the participants consider themselves as taking an active part in raising) who ranged in age from three to 27, (mean = 14.63, median = 14, mode = 12). However, the majority of children (n=30) were ages ten to 18, and while participants were not limited to answering questions in reference to them only, their answers were most often about experiences with these children. The demographics have been presented in this aggregated form to protect participant confidentiality.

Components of the Discourse

This section examines the information and messages parents have imparted to their children. All parents spoke frequently about at least some of the following topics with their children: sexual assault, sexuality, gender, and safety, with themes of consent and respect for self and others interwoven throughout; the majority of parents interviewed regularly discussed all of them, though there was some variation in regard to frequency and emphasis.

An evolving explanation of sexual assault. The discourse participating parents created with their children about sexual assault varied over time, often growing in detail and specificity as their children matured or reached stages in their life where more information was deemed necessary to help keep them safe. In all of the narratives about this discourse, parents were mindful of their children's age and developmental levels; as one father stated, "I'm not going to talk about sexual assault, the ins and outs of that, with my nine-year-old in the same way that I'm going to talk about it with my 17-year-old." Many participants seemed to introduce their children to the subject of sexual assault through telling them about their work. For younger children and/or children with non-neurotypical processing capabilities, parents tended to speak in generalized terms, often explaining their work, and by proxy, sexual assault, as "respond[ing] to help the person who got hurt." A common explanation from parents who had to leave home at night to respond to crisis line calls when their children were young is exemplified by a participant who remembered telling her children, "'well, somebody was hurt and so Mom had to go... help them and talk to them and make sure that they're okay.'"

Parents continued presenting generalized knowledge and age-appropriate language to their children while adding in some more specific terms and concepts over time, such as the interpersonal, intentional, and typically gendered nature of the *hurt* to which they responded. A

mother stated: “I’ve sort of framed it like, ‘sometimes ... people take advantage of other people and they do things to them or with them ... that they shouldn’t be doing and they don’t have permission to do.’” Another participant, providing a similar example, stated:

As they grow, I uncover more details rather than telling them all at once, because ... sometimes they’re too young to understand nuances of it. ... first they just thought that “Daddy helps people.” And then they started to understand that mostly what I’m doing is helping women. ... And at first I just explained them in very general terms ... “rape is just the most violent form of attack that a man can do to a woman” and that satisfied their curiosity. And then as they got to be a little bit older, they’ve gotten a more sophisticated understanding of what the word means and what it is that I do.

Parents’ discourse with their children continued to evolve as the children moved through developmental stages.

Rape and Sex. When children did not fully understand sex, they might be able to approximate an emotional understanding of the devastation of rape, but they were unable to accurately conceptualize its nature. For example, one participant explained:

She knows that I work at the ... rape crisis center and she knows that it has to do with sex, which she doesn’t quite understand. I think that... in her mind it has more to do with, like, being naked in public... I think it has to do with, like, having your clothes taken off in public, which is absolutely horrifying to a ten-year-old.

A number of parents found that a child’s understanding of sex, along with their individual sexual development correlated with his or her ability to grasp a more accurate meaning of sexual assault; referring to sex was helpful to the parent’s explanation of sexual assault, as well. One participant reported:

When they were little, I used to say, “well, I need to go take care of people who’ve been hurt.” And so they were okay with that initially. As they’ve gotten older, I’ve been very open and frank with them about what it means when those people get hurt. So, I’ve actually...told them that, “sometimes people use sex as a weapon or they use sex as a means to hurt other people.”

Another participant stated:

And then as they got older, they hear about it [rape] in the news, they hear a story about it, and they want to know a little bit more about what that really was. So as they’ve begun to understand what sex is, I was able to add some of those details into helping them know what I do also. And plus, I also wanted to help them distinguish between sex and rape, so that they understand that they’re not the same thing, that rape is not sex, that it’s a form of violence, it’s a form of assault.

Even as parents referred to sex in the context of explaining sexual assault, they were careful to distinguish rape from sex and to frame consensual sex in a positive light. One participant reported telling her children:

“What I do is help people who had something that should have looked like this, but instead looked like this because of these reasons because this happened.” And you know, we’ve talked about a little bit, not very much, but a little bit about “how you know, most, most encounters are healthy and wonderful and here’s what goes into that. And sometimes they’re not because some people sort of don’t feel like they need to make sure they have consent.”

One father described telling his son:

“Sexuality is an enjoyable thing. It’s a powerful and enjoyable, it’s a healthy thing even, but it needs to be done in the right context for it to be healthy. And out of context, done in the wrong way, it’s not even not healthy, it’s hurtful, it’s explosive.”

However, a parent who frequently spoke with her children about consent and the choices people make whether or not to seek and respect their partners’ consent also stated:

Well, I try really hard not to use the language of sexuality when I’m talking about rape. I try to use the language of violence, because it isn’t sexuality. And I do try to show, “though they’re violating a part of your body that you associate with sexuality, it is not sexuality to be assaulted. It is violent, it’s just that the violence happened to be on the part of your body that you associate with sexuality. It’s not sexuality.” ... I get really upset when I see that kind of language. Even victims do it because ... we’re not very skilled in our culture ... they’ll say “he had sex with me here,” but they mean “he raped me here.”

Explaining rape in part through sex yet also stressing their differences and trying to promote positive attitudes toward sexuality was a dialectical task many parents took on.

Connecting definitions. Participants were not asked specifically how they define sexual assault or if and how they have defined it with their children, but in their narratives many of them provided examples of doing so. Parents tended to make sure that their children had an accurately expansive definition of sexual assault that did not rely on a “stranger-danger” paradigm or the use of violent force. One participant stated:

We talk about consent all the time and have talked about what sexual violence is and what sexual assault is and that it’s not just a bad guy jumping out of the woods, and that it happens all the time.

Another reported:

I try to explain to them ... “there are so many different forms of sexual assault and it doesn’t always have to be, you know, forceful, violent, whatever.” With my girls growing up starting to date, we do talk a lot about coercion and peer pressure and those types of things.

Many parents connected the definition of sexual assault to related or component issues, such as consent and the difference between healthy relationships and those where domestic violence occurs. Examples of this are provided by participants who stated:

We’ve been... specific as to what exactly the legal definition is. And then to include some of the more obscure things that people don’t always think about, ... intoxication and consent and what that means, that kind of stuff. What a positive relationship looks like especially as they are starting to date themselves now and ... those things.

Another mother reported:

I’ve been really blunt, I say “I work in rape prevention and that means ... when a woman says or a guy says no and a partner continues on doing what they’re doing and they’re doing things that you don’t like sexually, that they don’t stop”...we’ve talked about what it means to be a healthy relationship, between healthy relations and when it is not a healthy relationship. And what rape is and what domestic violence is, beyond, you know, physically abusing your partner. Making them do, you know we’ve talked about coercion or ... “making your partner do what they may not wanna do.”

Defining sexual assault within the contexts where it frequently occurs or where risk is high seemed to be an important message of parents’ discourse.

Introducing complexity and risk. Parents introduced and tailored an explanation of sexual assault to their children as they were growing up while simultaneously expanding and contextualizing it. As children matured, many parents spoke more candidly about the risks they might face, particularly when alcohol was present, and added complexity to the gender specific paradigm of who perpetrates sexual assault and who is at risk. One mother described wanting her daughters to know:

Well, obviously that “the vast majority of sexual assaults are perpetrated against women by men,” and that’s a reality, and that they need to be aware of that. ... but I’ve also talked about... “they could be raped by another woman too, ... so it’s not only that men are perpetrators.” And I guess I’ve talked to them a little bit about not being, I don’t want them to be paranoid, but I don’t want them to be overtrusting when they don’t know someone, like when they do get to college, that they shouldn’t necessarily just go hang out with someone alone in that person’s room or their own room without, you know, having other people be around or know where they are, know what they’re doing, cause it, you know, “you have to get to know people before you trust them 100%.”

Another mother reported:

I have a son and a daughter and with my son, you know, it was talking to him about him needing to be aware that sometimes ... it’s not just girls who get sexually assaulted, it’s also boys, and so, more along the protecting himself kind of—I think for both of them, actually, it was about protecting themselves and about who they needed to be concerned about and that, for my son ... that he needed to be just as concerned about men as he was about women.

While aware and open with their children about sexual assault perpetration and victimization roles not being determined by gender, many parents provided somewhat gender differentiated messages to their children about sexual assault as they moved into adolescence and thus higher risk for both perpetration and victimization. One participant stated:

I've had the, that talk several times with my daughter, saying that, you know, "if you are under the influence, you're being pressured or forced, that as a female, you're more likely going to be targeted," and just to let her know, to know what her limits are if she's deciding to drink. And my son, is that, you know, "guys are usually the ones who do it. And so, you need to make sure that you only go forward with verbal consent at every part of the sexual activity. If it's making out, touching, or having intercourse, that it is only with a clear verbal yes when no one is under the influence of alcohol, ... threat of force, or pressure."

A father reported:

I want my daughter to know very specifically about safety, ... not primary prevention, that's more for the sons. But as far as what she can do to stay safe, ... going somewhere in pairs, you know, don't go out alone, have a plan, all those types of things, up to and including the defensive techniques that I mentioned. And as far as my sons, I want them to know ... what they should do and what they shouldn't do. What they can expect and what they should be responsible for as young men.

The findings presented thus far have demonstrated how parents' discourses specifically around sexual assault evolved. However, the discourse of sexual assault is not limited to that topic. Participants' narratives encompassed a variety of related topics; even if not necessarily talking directly about sexual assault, these subjects are considered a vital part of a discourse

about sexual assault. The following sections map out these components of the discourse—conversations that address the continuum of sexual violence, sexuality, gender, and safety.

Addressing the continuum of sexual violence. Open and axial coding of participants' narratives showed that the majority of these parents approached sexual assault as a continuum of attitudes and behaviors that revolve around a disregard for another person's boundaries and which are interconnected with the elements of a rape supportive culture, such as male privilege, hypermasculization, and systemic social injustice. Many parents talked about the importance of addressing issues along the spectrum of sexual assault with their children without necessarily naming them as such to their children. "I talked to him in terms of issues as they came up in his childhood relating to, particularly, concern about women and concern about fighting issues." *Consent* and *respect for boundaries* at every level of interactions were themes brought up by a number of parents.

Sibling and Peer Relations. A number of participants talked about bringing in themes related to their understanding of sexual assault when responding to their children's behavior toward one another. One parent relayed this example from when her son was six and "in this stage of being very kissy":

I definitely introduced aspects of it [sexual assault] with him. So like, for example, he was kissing...my daughter... all over her face and stuff and [my daughter] was screaming, "Stop. Don't! Don't!" And he wasn't stopping. And so I used that in the moment to talk to him about the fact that, you know, when he is "doing something to somebody that clearly they're uncomfortable with it, or you're not sure they're uncomfortable with it, even if you think its funny or you think its okay ... we have to stop and make sure that we're not doing something that really could bother another

person.” ...I haven’t said “that’s sexual assault” or anything like that. But maybe I should, but I haven’t.

Another mother stated:

...We talk about it all the time, like, they’re 17 and 15, you know, my son will say something like, “oh, that’s so stupid” or you know. And I’m like, “hey look, you don’t have to like what’s going on right now, but you still have to be ... respectful ... you’ve got to continue to show respect to females. That’s a good habit to learn. But that doesn’t mean that girls get to walk all over you either,” which my daughter tries to do to him. And of course, I interrupt that behavior as well.

A number of parents approached sexual assault by focusing specifically with their children on issues of inter-gender relations and trying to counteract views that set up conflict or limit the potential of these relationships. A father explained:

... I don’t always try to nag at them and bring it back consciously and openly about sexual assault issues, but I do talk about just gender relationship issues, like, with my older son who’s now getting into girls, starting to pick types of girls that he would want to have relationships with, ... and I try to nudge him out of some of the more superficial criteria that he gets handed to him as a young boy every day

Another father described:

... Discussions that we have about privilege and oppression in general on all different levels, especially between the genders, and that boys aren’t better than girls. And girls aren’t less than boys. That both sides can win, no matter what we’re talking about - gender, race, gender identity, access to resources.

Bullying. Many parents included bullying as within or connected to the spectrum of sexual violence and brought up teaching their children to reject bullying, whether on a personal or global level. Examples of this are provided by the following two participants:

They know things like that violence is rooted in oppression, and they know to stand up to kids who are bullying, and they do. ... They understand that there's this connection between, you know, maybe that less seemingly violent choice, maybe to be bullying somebody, can really rapidly lead to something a lot worse... to suicide or it could lead to other things.

We talk about our military interventions in other countries and things that are going on between you know, warring factions or people that don't get along. And when one side is totally dominating the other, and nobody else is saying anything, they understand that that's wrong in and of itself.

Social justice and intersecting oppressions. Talking with and teaching their children about social justice, such as issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, was another common theme that many parents considered an integral part of their discourse of sexual assault. One mother reported,

You know, I think being in the movement, being in the sexual assault field, too, I feel like you parent around all kinds of issues 'cause it's all connected to sort of social justice issues. So we've had long conversations about using the word gay and we've had lots of LGBT conversations and her uncle is gay. And we've had lots of questions, conversations about racism and homophobia and heterosexism, and my kids are pretty savvy about that.

Similar examples were provided by fathers, such as this participant:

... For me it goes beyond just issues of sexual assault. It goes into issues relating to respect, it goes into issues relating to diversity, ... issues related to racism, classism, heterosexism, and a variety of other issues. ... to me anti-rape work and the anti-rape issue is not anything by itself. It connects with other direct violence issues, it relates just to general issues relating to masculinity and what it is and what it should be.

Talking about issues related to sexual assault has also led some parents to talk more in depth about other forms of oppression that they have gained an increased awareness of because of their work. The majority of parents discussed talking with their children about gender not being a binary and normalizing all ranges of gender and sexual expression. They have also discussed with their children how frequently people who do challenge these social norms are rejected or subject to attack. The following examples from two participants were typical for this theme:

In our house, we've really normalized sexual orientation and gender identity and all of that. And I've asked [my daughter], I'm like, "so do you think there are any kids in your school that are, like, male-bodied but feel female or female-bodied and feel male?" ... And you know, I don't think I would have ever had those conversations without being involved in some kind of social justice movement.

They identify that kids who are perhaps experimenting with their gender identity are often bullied or often made fun of, and they both are ... the kind of kid that will go and protect the underdog, or look out for the underdog or speak up for the underdog.

By introducing their children to issues of social justice, these parents link sexual assault to all other forms of oppression and violation. Rather than always having to talk about the more

extreme end of the continuum, parents could introduce values and address attitudes and behaviors in more subtle ways.

Talking about sex. Parents presented discussions of sex and sexuality as quotidian elements of their discourse with their children. In questions where parents were asked about how they talk about their work with their children, the content, message, and context of the conversations, how their parenting was influenced by the knowledge they had gained through working in the sexual assault field, and what sort of values related to sexual assault they hoped to pass on to their children, the majority of parents included in their responses examples of speaking with their children about sexual intercourse, sexuality, and safe sexual practices. In all cases, they or their spouses had provided accurate information to their children about conception, contraception, prophylactics and sexually transmitted diseases; however, the majority of their discussions went beyond these technical subjects to explore the more emotional and psychosocial components, both positive and negative, of sexual activity. These themes were interwoven with discussions of *consent* and *healthy relationships*, which tied discussions of sex to the continuum of sexual violence.

Non-shaming messages. Around a third of the participants talked about holding discussions with their children about sexuality that were intentionally non-shaming. They wanted their children to have a healthy sense of sexuality, so they attempted to provide accurate information and encouragement not to be embarrassed by sexual feelings and desires, body parts, and changes in their bodies. A number of parents presented this stance overtly to their children. One father described parenting around sex by "... Not having sex be taboo at an early age, teaching ... the correct names for body parts. ... teaching kids that ... there's nothing to be

ashamed about their bodies.” A mother whose son showed more comfort speaking about sexuality with his father stated:

I don't know if he's [my husband] used the word *masturbate*, but he's definitely talked to him [our son] about, you know, feelings, and that “it's okay and there's nothing shaming about it. And sometimes you'll hear jokes” and “what the jokes mean,” and you know, that kind of a conversation.

One father disclosed that he had reacted in anger when he walked in on his daughter watching pornography and masturbating in the living room, and that he had been shaming despite having been trained that this was normal, experimental behavior. Later on,

I went back to my older daughter and apologized. I addressed it, “I was wrong, this is normal, this is healthy, the dad in me freaked out. I was wrong, I'm sorry. I wish I could do it over. I wish I could do it again.” You know, I went back and let her know it was my response that was wrong, not hers.

Thus, even when what might be considered a more instinctual parental reaction (as this father called it) overrides one's chosen parenting philosophy in the moment, one can still employ non-shaming messages after the fact in the process of repair.

One parent explicitly linked non-shameful feelings about sexuality with consent, so that her children would feel good about granting, obtaining, and respecting consent.

I never wanted my children to feel shame about you know, their sexual activity, and that part of not feeling that shame is, you know, again, “making sure that you do have consent” and “it's normal to want your partner, that that doesn't mean that we ignore their wishes as well.”

In general, parents took care to avoid and counteract non-shaming messages when talking about sex.

Holistic sexuality. Related to non-shaming messages, many parents also emphasized conveying sexuality and consensual sexual activity between mature, caring, and trusted partners in a positive light. However, they did not try to minimize the potential harms that can result from negative sexual experiences. Thus, parents worked to present a holistic, dialectical view that encompassed both the rewards and risks of sexual activity. One father reported:

So we just kind of lay out a value system to him that you know, this is, you know, “sexuality is an enjoyable thing. It’s a powerful and enjoyable, it’s a healthy thing, even, but it needs to be done in the right context for it to be healthy. And out of context, done in the wrong way, it’s not even not healthy, it’s hurtful, it’s explosive.” So we tell him, “... when you meet these conditions, you know, when you have this going on in a relationship, the person of your choosing who has also chosen you, and you’re at this point in your life, ... then we want you to enjoy it. You will enjoy it. It’s going to be amazing, you’re going to love it. If you’re not at that point, and you haven’t met these conditions, you’re not ready and it won’t be enjoyable and it won’t be healthy.”

Some of the harms parents pointed to were when partners pressure and do not respect each other, when women are viewed only as sources of sexual gratification, and when there is dishonesty about sexual health status.

Decisions to engage. Another component of a holistic presentation of sexuality centered on talking to children specifically about the decision to engage in sexual intercourse and conveying the message “that it’s a big step and it’s not just about, you know, physically feeling good, but there is a lot more to it. And emotionally it’s a big deal.” The majority of parents

spoke about encouraging their children to postpone sexual activity with a partner. While some parents named an age they considered appropriate and some named being in a healthy, committed relationship (up to and including marriage), all stressed the importance of maturity and feeling ready. Readiness was often related to comfort with the subject of sex, as demonstrated by a mother who stated:

...one thing that I say to my kids is that, “if you think you’re ready to have sex you need to be able to talk about it. And if you can’t talk about it with me it’s going to be even harder to talk about it with, you know, a potential boyfriend or girlfriend.”

Comfort with taking part in sexual activities was also talked about as a guiding standard, as this participant demonstrates:

So I have had those talks with them, the talks about “don’t compromise yourself. Only when you’re ready and you’re comfortable and if anything doesn’t feel right about it, just don’t do it. There will be other opportunities.” And I did have that talk with them too about how “sometimes people will say if you really love me, [you’ll have sex with me]” and I will say to them, “if they really love you, they wouldn’t be saying that. It’s not about sex.”

Explaining healthy relationships. Parents also worked to convey the elements of healthy relationships and to differentiate between healthy relationships and unhealthy ones. The most commonly listed elements of healthy relationships were *communication, mutual respect for each other and each other’s boundaries, and the absence of coercion*. Relationships as enjoyable was another theme, often used to counteract social pressures. One participant stated:

... we’ve talked about having fun, enjoying your time with a person, not being with them because you think you have to be or, there’s a lot of social credibility that goes with being

in a relationship when you're in high school but, if you're not really enjoying it, not having fun, then what's the point?

One parent described how he took much care to communicate to his children the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships, using rape supportive attitudes as an example:

... I want to really make clear to them is that there are mistakes people make in relationships. But there are things that are not mistakes, that are done intentionally as strategic forms of control, as strategic coercion. ... I help them understand the difference between making mistakes in a relationship, which everyone does, and which can be come back from and processed in a good relationship, versus intentional forms of hurt. So one of the ways that I do that is to, like, when they want to know, "well, why did this happen? Why would anyone ever rape a woman?" ... one of the ways that I've answered that is to say that, "well, men who do this stuff aren't usually the psycho-sicko types of people hiding in bushes. I mean, that does happen, but that's actually pretty rare. The more common type of violence that happens in these relationships is done by men who believe that this is right. They believe they're entitled to do this. They've been raised or they've somehow accepted a mindset that tells them that 'if I want to get my way, I can do whatever I have to do to do that. And if someone stands in my way, then it's acceptable for me to harm them. It's acceptable for me to force them to give in to me.' So that those are intentional and strategic forms of hurt that are done. They are not relationship mistakes, they're not slip-ups, they're not misunderstandings, they're not activities that just went too far, you know, without realizing it. That this is, it's intentionally done and it's a result of a philosophy or a mindset that some guys have that says that, 'because I'm

a guy, because I'm a man, it's appropriate for me to use my strength, to use my power, to hurt, to scare, and to control others so that I get my way.”

Setting up such a distinction clarifies the key differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships while also challenging an unrealistic expectation that could be unintentionally set up about healthy relationships being free from error.

Sex and rape. Previously in this section, it was discussed how an understanding of rape was sometimes aided by a discussion of sex. The vast majority of parents continued this link when discussing sex with their children, both overtly and subtly, mostly in the form of discussing how a situation that one or both partners might consider as sex can be or turn into rape if consent is absent. Some of the messages stressed consent as something that needed to be continually granted to be valid, rather than functioning as an all-access pass. One parent stated, “I said, you know, ‘if you start out with a yes and decide it’s no, the expectation is that person has to stop.’”

Another participant reported:

Well, definitely we've had the talks, and I did just kind of talk about the consent. And that, sometimes “how it would be awkward to have those conversations but that how much better it is that your partner is saying yes rather than you just did what you wanted to and they didn't say no.” And so we talk about what, you know, “what that would look like and what that could be, which is sexual assault.” ... I just say, you know, “if you're making out and let's say you guys touch this time, that doesn't mean you're touching next time.”

Some parents sought to help their children be able to identify when what they might think of as a sexual encounter qualifies as a sexual assault. One participant described telling her children:

... “Bottom line is, anybody who has any sort of respect for you and wants to be in a relationship will not do anything that makes you uncomfortable. And they will always stop when you say stop, and they will respect those boundaries. And there should never be any question of that, regardless.” With my girls especially, I tell them “don’t feel pressured, don’t feel like you have to give in to a boy, otherwise he won’t like you anymore. Because that is sexual assault, and that’s considered date rape.”

Another mother described conversations with her son where:

We’ve talked about consent and what is consent ...that “if someone says they want to be kissed today, they don’t want to be kissed tomorrow, then you need to respect that.” ... we’ve talked about what is a healthy, respectful relationship. We’ve talked about ... the sex laws of the state ... specifically looking at age range, meaning, ... if you’re under 16 and the person’s ... over 21, then that is not consent. And anything under 16, you’re having sex with anybody under the age of 16, it’s not considered sex, it’s considered rape.

As evident in the above excerpts, *consent* was the most common theme in all discussions related to sexuality and was talked about by parents as a vital aspect of all shared sexual experiences. Consent was considered an integral component of discussions of sexuality that should be taught along side “the birds and the bees.”

Unteaching and Teaching Gender. All participants in the study discussed creating a discourse with their children in which gender did not function as a constraint on who they were or how they could be in the world. Many parents brought up examples of encouraging their children to “just be who they are” and pursue their interests regardless of whether they fit with

traditionally gendered notions of what was appropriate for girls versus boys. In that way, parents sought to create a *gender neutral* or *non gender-biased* atmosphere.

Rejecting rigidity. A number of parents taught their children about how gender can be imposed and often used to oppress women. One mother reported:

We've definitely talked about gender as a construct and ... [my daughter] is pretty aware of gender and is pretty quick to ... point out when she feels like ... the girl/ female gender is being sort of construed or portrayed as not being as competent or strong as or whatever as the boy gender.

Many parents also recognized and talked to their children about the ways that rigid gender expectations are harmful and limiting to men. The following example is from a father, though this view of gender constructs being harmful to men was shared by mothers as well:

I think a lot of what I tried to do and my wife tried to do also, but was to basically get at that ... being a boy wasn't and shouldn't be a very narrow line of "you gotta be tough," of "you gotta be this or you gotta be that."

Gender and sexuality as a spectrum. Another way parents tried to teach their children to reject rigid gender roles was to acquaint them with concepts, and often people, who were not part of the heterosexual gender binary or did not conform to rigid gender expressions. Many times when parents were asked about what they teach their children about their own gender and other genders, parents talked about promoting an atmosphere of acceptance for all within their home. One father reported "... they are aware that it isn't just a bilateral, it's not just boys or girls, that there's everything in between, you know, the whole LGBTQ community." Another participated described how:

In our house, we've really normalized sexual orientation and gender identity and all of that. And I've asked [my daughter], I'm like, "so do you think there are any kids in your school that are, like, male-bodied but feel female or female-bodied and feel male? And do you understand what that's called? And how that would be really hard for somebody in middle school? And do you ever see anyone getting teased?"

Through holding these conversations, parents deconstructed gender as a rigid, binary category of identity in conversation with their children.

Gender specific messages. Trying not to support gender biases did not mean that parents were "gender-blind" or unresponsive to gender. Many parents tailored specific messages to their sons and daughters differentiated by gender. Most often, these messages appeared to try to offset traditional male gender privilege and some of the sexist attitudes that partially constitute a rape supportive culture. "I do see a difference in the way that, some of things I say to my son, like, I said I encouraged him to be respectful of others whereas I encourage my girls to be more respectful of themselves." A mother of two daughters stated, "I've done a lot of concrete things around raising women, young women who are strong and courageous and brave and willing to stand up for themselves and willing to ... advocate for themselves."

Male strength for good. A common theme for many of the participants with sons was to speak positively about men's strength and size as a protective force, and that they should be used for good purposes rather than to dominate or coerce. One father described challenging hypermasculization by offering an alternative viewpoint on what it means to be a man:

So we talk about what that means to be young boys and what values they have as men. And one of the things that I've done with that is to use male training in a different way than it's often used. For example, the whole "be a real man, act like a real man" thing is

often used with boys sort of to propagandize them or pressure them into doing things that aren't so kind or aren't very good. ... I borrow the phrase "act like a real man" or "be like a real man" in a way to give them a different view of what manhood is. So we talk about "men as people of strength, but in a way that's beneficial and respectful to other people, to other men and other women."

Parents did not want their children to be at all limited by gender and gender expectations while they also recognized that these forces existed and needed to be challenged or counteracted.

Gender comprises a part of the discourse about sexual assault because of the typically gendered nature of its perpetration and victimization and because rigid views of the rights and capabilities of men versus women are essential elements of a rape supportive culture.

Supporting safety. The fifth domain of parents' discourse about sexual assault as identified through open and axial coding is composed of the messages they conveyed regarding safety. Safety is a broad category that includes everything from protection from imminent harm to systemic and structural changes that increase protective factors and reduce risk on a global scale. Included in this category are conversations about boundaries, risk reduction, and the values and expectations parents conveyed to their children about how to act in the world. It is clear from parents' narratives that when they talk about safety, they are not only referring to safety from rape. Parents also allude to all high-risk situations for children and adolescents, such as sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, relationship violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and drunken driving.

Boundaries. Many parents reported starting to talk with their children about boundaries from an early age. These conversations often revolved around their bodies, who should and

should not be touching them, and what to do if any touch is uncomfortable. As one participant explained:

... I have always emphasized that it's their body. No one gets to touch their body without their permission. And that if anybody ever did touch their body they could always tell me and I would help them. And I've always tried to give them that because I just feel like that was a piece I didn't really get to have. And so I always wanted them to know, and that they have a right to say no to anybody touching their body.

For many parents, discussing boundaries was a way to start the discourse of sexual assault and help to protect against it before children were ready to comprehend definitions or specific details about sexual assault. One participant reported:

... We've never sat down and said "here's what rape is." But we have a lot of conversations about protecting yourself and your own personal space, and you know, "if somebody were to touch your body or make you feel uncomfortable about your body, those are conversations that we need to keep having and that that's not okay."

Talking about boundaries could also come specifically in the form of giving children permission to choose how and when they let others come in contact with them. An example from one mother demonstrates this concept:

I told her that she never has to hug anybody she doesn't want to. You know sometimes relatives, they're, "oh you've got to give your aunt so-and-so a kiss or a hug" or whatever. I've never gone along with that, and I've always told my kids, "if you're comfortable hugging them and kissing them you can do so, but if you don't want to, you have the right to your own body and you can say no, no matter how upset a grandparent

or uncle or whatever might get.” ... I tried to teach them from the beginning that their body is their own and it’s entirely up to them who they choose to hug or kiss.

When children were older, boundaries were often brought up in conjunction with discussions about sexual activity or sexual assault, as seen in some of the excerpts provided in some of the previous sections. However, parents also presented boundaries as something that could be addressed individually in conversations starting at younger ages, and which promoted the safety of their children.

Risk reduction. Parents wanted to teach their children ways to stay safe/reduce their exposure to risk while at the same time assuring them that the only fault for sexual assault belongs to the perpetrator. A mother who works in a university setting stated:

I try to share some of the ideas that I share with students with them about ... keeping as safe as possible. Knowing, unfortunately, that ... perpetrators are going to rape, and they’re not responsible if something happens, but there are obviously a few things you can try to keep in mind to try to keep yourself as safe as possible.

Parents’ struggles with striking the right balance in conveying this message are addressed in *The Good, The Bad, and The Complex* section. The most common subthemes within risk reduction related to substance use, attire, and peers.

Substance usage. Around a third of participants in the study reported sending clear and direct messages to their children about expectations around drinking and usually talked about the role of alcohol or drugs in many sexual assault scenarios. Most of these parents had children aged 15 and older in their home, such as this mother:

I’ve actually just said to my 16-year-old that my expectation is that she’s not going to be drinking alcohol with her friends ... “I know a lot of your friends are gonna pressure you

to drink, but ... when you look at what goes on for young women when they drink, they increase their risk.”

Drugs and alcohol were also presented as antithetical to consent, another way of defining sexual assault within a context of related behaviors or high-risk situations. One mother described telling her son,

“You need to make sure that you only go forward with verbal consent at every part of the sexual activity. If it’s making out, touching, or having intercourse, that it is only with a clear verbal yes when no one is under the influence of alcohol or threat of force or pressure.”

As with all risk-reduction messages, parents were also careful to balance a discussion of the inherent risks of drinking and their expectations with assurance that being assaulted is never the victims’ fault and that even if the child broke a parent’s rule by drinking, he or she should always choose the safest option for whatever situation they find themselves in. A father reported:

I want them to know that even if they did, even though it’s something I wouldn’t want them to do, that it’s still okay to come talk to me. ... I have said “I’d put my feelings aside over whatever it was involved or whatever the situation was, that wouldn’t matter”....

One parent reported “constantly” telling her kids, “‘if you’re in a bad situation, say you’re at a party or something, and there’s nobody who’s sober to drive you home, I want you to call me.’” Establishing clear expectations for behavior while also seeking to make sure that their children knew that they always could rely on their parents even if they were not behaving as expected is a way parents demonstrated a dialectical approach to safety.

Clothing. What did and did not constitute appropriate attire and the role it could play in exposure to risk was another theme with which a number of participants struggled. A fairly representative explication of this view was provided by a participant who stated:

... I don't believe your clothing can ever be to blame for what's happened, but ... as a parent, as a father, it's, you know, it is a uniform. ... people will judge you, right or wrong, based on what you're wearing. So I do believe you have to pay attention to the message that you are portraying with the outfit or the uniform that you are wearing. ... Not that it gives people permission to do these things, but there are risks associated with it. ...you don't want to victim blame in any way, but you have to empower victims to do as much as they can to stay safe. Which includes being conscience of what you're doing, how you're doing it, where you're doing it. It's unfortunate, but that's the world we live in.

However, one participant talked about clothing only in regard to challenging perceptions of clothing as sending a message about a person's sexual proclivities and availability:

... we definitely talk about how ... "it's ridiculous to think that you're sending any kind of messages, permission to people with what you wear or how you wear it or if your boobs stick out or whatever." ... really good conversations about "these messages that girls get so young, about how we have to be ashamed and cover up and worry about what we're enticing these poor, you know, boys" ... And [my husband] is ... involved in a lot of these conversations and it's great, 'cause I think it's really important for both [my son] and [my daughter] to hear a guy say, "you know, I think that's pretty silly to think us boys can't, you know, look at a girl and appreciate her smarts and her athletic ability or

her, how much we have in common with them. And you know ... we're lowering the bar too much for boys to think that that's all boys care about."

A few parents brought up how advances in technology within the past twenty years have impacted the continuum of sexual violence (such as spreading rumors or bullying over the internet and the advent of *sexting*). The ubiquity of recording devices and the reach and permanency of online data prompted one parent to think about what images of her children might be getting sent out into the world. One mother reported:

... My message, I mean, with her, you know, if she's facetimeing with her friends ... or whatever, our conversations are "making sure that you're not dressed inappropriately" [laughs.] ... The message there is never "if you're dressed inappropriately something's going to happen to you," by that I mean if she's facetimeing, like, I don't want her sitting in a pair of short shorts and a tanktop because I think that that is inappropriate to put out for a ten-year-old on the internet. So, you know, "you're fully clothed, you're never taking pictures of yourself, you're never sending pictures to somebody, you're never connecting to somebody that you don't know online." So, things like that."

Overall, clothing and messages about clothing seemed to be an area where parents felt some of the most discomfort in their discourse.

Safety with peers. Parents also talked about risk reduction in relation to others. In addition to advising children to stay with trusted friends and not to leave them or let them leave alone, parents also talked to their children about how they could help their friends through bystander intervention. As one mother reported:

I also told my son, because he's a guy, he hangs out with guys, that he may actually see a guy, you know, let's say maybe trying to take a girl to the back room who is obviously drunk, and how he could interrupt that. You know, what he could do.

Bystander intervention is addressed more fully later on in this chapter as a motivating force.

Values and Expectations. Parents discussed a number of values they worked to pass on to their children as well as hopes and expectations about how they would act in the world. The most common themes related to respect for oneself and others, independent thought and a sense of responsibility in the world. Parents related these values to promoting safety for both their children and the people in their children's lives. One participant stated:

I want them to respect themselves and I want them to respect everyone around them, not just partners, but friends and, and family and teachers and you know, I want them to, above all, respect themselves. And to realize that you know, they don't have to do anything that they don't want to do for somebody else.

Another parent described wanted her children to feel

... like thoughtful people that are confident that they are deserving of making their own decisions for what they want to do with their bodies and respecting other people. ... at the end of the day it's feeling like ... you deserve to make decisions for yourself and you also owe it to other people to let them make decisions for themselves.

Values were also discussed on a large scale in reference to working for and promoting social justice; one father stated, "I think ... his mother and myself both tried to push values upon him of respecting other kids and of not being racist, sexist, homophobic or various things." Another participant wanted his children to know "that bettering society and bettering the lives of others are important things to consider as you lay out the course of your life." While these values can

stand on their own, they reflect a desire for safety in as much as they seek to make the world better, and less harmful, for everyone living in it.

Having explored the major findings of what parents say as part of their discourse about sexual assault, we turn now to how they go about constructing and relaying their discourse.

Enacting the Discourse

A number of themes present in parents' narratives formed a picture of how the participants go about implementing a discourse about sexual assault. Major findings were that parents created a saturated atmosphere in which conversations about sexual assault or related issues arose frequently and organically. In this way, children were "steeped" in a consciousness of sexual assault; at the same time, parents employed a variety of strategies in deciding what, when, and how to impart information related to sexual assault. Other factors acted as supports or barriers to parents' creation or shaping of a discourse about sexual assault.

A saturated atmosphere. In considering the number of ways parents work to create and support a discourse about sexual assault (broadly defined) with their children, the term *saturated* comes to mind. Although the term could connote heavy-handedness, which is not the intention, it is employed rather to elicit an atmosphere where knowledge and awareness of sexual assault and its relationship to other forms of social injustice is in the air and in the water, and parents have shaped a family environment accordingly. Parenting around respect for self and others with attention to boundaries, demonstrating consent, challenging gender bias and sexism, attention to social justice, and education about sexual violence was presented by participants as "just part of our home environment." For example, many parents reported regularly speaking about the above-mentioned subjects in their dinner table conversations. Themes of *ongoing conversations*, *involvement*, and *modeling* are elements of this atmosphere.

Ongoing conversations. *Ongoing conversations* was a phrase all participants used to describe the manner in which they addressed issues with their children. There was never a comprehensive, final *talk* that was supposed to convey all that a child needed to know (or all that a parent was willing to share). One mother described how talking about sexual assault with her 17-year-old-daughter, rather than being a discrete event, is “almost always part now of ... just our daily functioning.” The topics of discussion that were most frequently described in this manner included sexual assault, sexuality, and safety and evolved over time to match the developmental level of the child and in response to environmental factors, such as something in the media. As one parent stated:

... I think it's a more like, a sex conversation that's ongoing, 'cause it's... something that we work on all the time.... I could have a “sex talk” with my 6-year-old and just talk about boundaries... he would get a certain quote-unquote “sex talk.” And then ... have a different quote-unquote “sex talk” with my 14-year-old and a different one with my 19-year-old. And then as they would be different every year. So ... I try to have an ongoing dialog about sexuality and keeping that open.

Organic and Open. Two key characteristics of participants' ongoing conversations were their openness and organic nature . Rather than pre-planned monologues, most participants described conversations that arose “organically.” The following two participants provided fairly representative examples of this theme:

... sex ... was just never a taboo kind of topic in the house, so it came up... kind of naturally in conversation, in shared values and ideas a little bit more than... deliberate... conversations.

I don't know that we have too many conversations that are specifically like, "kids, today we're gonna sit down and we're gonna talk about sexual assault." We have those conversations, but they just sort of rise organically out of ... things they might be watching or things we're reading in the newspaper or, even if I have a particularly bad day at work.

Participants talked about how they kept an "open and honest," discourse by "keeping my lines of communication open with my kids" and "giving accurate information, answering questions honestly, truthfully, you know, even bringing up subjects." A majority of parents spoke about being willing to talk about any subject with their children. As one mother stated, "I'm the type of parent, I just kind of lay it out for them, if they ask me a question I answer it to the best of my abilities." Participants connected being open with promoting safety, preparation for the variety of situations—positive and negative—they may encounter, and sexual assault prevention.

Involvement. Over half of the participants noted that they involved their children in their work through volunteer opportunities at their workplace, participation in awareness-raising/advocacy events, and attending conferences and/or trainings. The children of participants in the study have taken part in fundraising walks, a retreat for survivors of sexual assault, teen summits, and attended conferences on sexuality, media representations of women, and bystander intervention. Parents described the involvement as being able to provide a realistic and first-hand perspective about the issues of sexual violence and how it affects people. One participant explained,

So they began to see first hand the face of sexual assault survival, so that it wasn't just a vague concept or something that was in a news story to them or something that I went off

in the day to do and then came back home. ... they got to personally know many, many women who are survivors ... so that's helped them kind of understand the human side of it, so it's not just a general social issue or a thing dad does at work during the day. So now they, they see it with their own eyes.

Bringing a child to the agency or an event was described as something that sparked conversation within the family and with peers. A mother reported "... when we did maintenance-type things at shelter, the kids would come along and they'd help and we'd talk about, you know, what goes on there." Another stated, "I've actually put them through our volunteer training and so they pretty much know all how the agency runs and they are kind of volunteer youth advocates themselves for their peers." Involving their children in their work could serve as a way to familiarize their children with the issues and encourage them to participate in actions geared toward service and social change.

Modeling. Participants reinforced their discourse by demonstrating the concepts and values they relayed to their children through their own behavior and actions. Some appeared to do this consciously while others considered it more of a natural result of living their values and being influenced by the field. One father stated, "Both my wife and I tried to demonstrate by our behavior, by showing respect for each other, and by talking about things as they came up." Referencing her daughter, a mother reported: "She kind of learned from that lifestyle, you know, instead of just, like, one talk... we adopt a lifestyle really into safety."

Over half of the participants discussed how they model elements of healthy relationships, such as gender equity and respect, to their children through their marriages—both those that are intact and those that ended in divorce. One mother reported, "in my household, she knows I make a lot of decisions. So she doesn't see me as ... being a gender-bias type of mom." A male

participant whose wife did not work outside the home stated, “we have a fairly traditionally gendered household as it turns out ... but they’re also seeing me ... be an equal participant in cooking and doing the dishes, and cleaning ... and anything else.” Parents also worked to model how to manage and resolve conflict. One father explained,

I know a lot of people say never argue in front of your kids, but we actually do. And we do it intentionally, we do it on purpose. Because how else will they learn how a healthy relationship deals with conflict? Every relationship will have conflict, even healthy ones, but if they never see how a healthy couple deals with conflict, they don’t develop that skill. So we both want them to see that a couple that respects each other can disagree, and they can process and they can hash it out in a way that doesn’t involve violence or coercion or intimidation. There’s no swearing, there’s no name calling, there’s no fear. Both people have free speech in the discussion. And it helps them understand that in a good relationship, conflict or disagreement does not mean that you will be harmed, that you will be abandoned, that you’ll be unloved, you’ll be punished for it.

One parent, herself a survivor of incest, described how she shared her healing process with her eldest son, who had recently disclosed to her that he had been sexually abused by his own father.

He’s watching me work on continuing to heal even when I’m in my forties. He sees that it’s a long road of healing and that there is a lot of work to do, even if he’s not able to take it all on right now, he just takes on the little pieces that he can.

Modeling the values put forth in their discourses, whether intentionally or not, creates a way for parents to animate words into actions, adding to the environment’s potential to steep their children in an awareness of sexual assault as they developed.

Strategies. Though few parents labeled them as such, a variety of strategies were employed in the creation of a discourse about sexual assault with their children. Strategies generally concerned choosing what kind of and how much information to present to their children how to effectively communicate and transmit the information and values presented.

Avoiding overload. While parents tended to steep their children in this discourse through an intentionally saturated atmosphere, they were careful not to drown them in too much information or too traumatic material. Avoiding overload was a theme that came up with the majority of parents and was usually mentioned in connection to the parents' assessment of their children's intellectual and emotional processing capacities at their various stages of development. The following two participants function as representative examples of the care parents took in titrating information: "I've been very open with my girls about contraception and all of that stuff, without like, you know, giving them more information than they were ready to hear."

It was something that we were very cautious about at first because you have to have some care when it comes to putting young minds into this issue, you know, bringing them into the mix of it and being vigilant about how much they can handle, how much they can process.

One of the participants, whose discourse rarely included direct conversations with her daughter about sexual assault, expressed the most concern about the potential reasons for and effects of such a conversation:

I don't talk with her so much, like, scare her, you know? ... I don't want her to be there to listen to me for my needs. I think of what my needs are, I'm in this field, you know, I don't want to talk to her like I use her for debrief.

This sentiment, while not widely shared, raises an interesting question about parent's motivations for creating a discourse about sexual assault: is it for the well-being of the child or the parent?

The answer suggested from participants' narratives is yes to both.

Some parents were careful to avoid overload because they thought their messages would more effectively reach their children if they held back. As one parent explained: "my experience with my kids has just been that ... if you start to give them too much information, it kind of freaks them out and ... they don't listen, they disconnect. So I've always given them the information when they want it." Along similar lines, another parent reported:

We tended to approach things from a practical and immediate point of view, which I think is the easiest way to reach children in general. ...I mean, the bigger picture was focused on in a certain sense, indirectly, but not as a heavy, direct, pressured thing. I don't think children listen very well to that kind of thing.

Thus, *avoiding overload* was a strategy both for protecting a child from potentially traumatic material and for enhancing their ability to process the information provided.

Letting the child initiate the conversation. Waiting for the child to initiate a question or conversation was another theme frequently brought up by study participants, and seemed to indicate to parents that they could proceed in the discussion without negative consequences. As one participant explained, "...as they got older and they started asking questions, I didn't really hold anything back." Another participant broke down his and his wife's process, stating:

Well, a lot of it's been led by their curiosity, because they'll kind of give us cues about what they're ready to handle by the questions they ask. ...As my kids have begun to ask questions ... we give them minimal answers and if it satisfies them, then that's fine, and

if they want to know more then we give them a little bit more. It's kind of a built-in guide about what they're ready to handle.

Once a child had opened a topic, a strategy a few parents described using at times was to push the limits of their children's comfort as a way to move a conversation forward. One mother stated,

I once heard that you always push them a little bit past their comfort level, so my kids will tell you, we were talking about this even at the dinner table tonight, [laughs], we were talking about how mom always pushes things a little bit into the, like, uncomfortable. Like, one time we saw a commercial on tv for Trojans. And my daughter said, "Mom, what's a trojan?" [Laughs]. And of course so I give them the very straightforward answer and use "now, that is the something that covers the penis to prevent pregnancy," that kind of stuff. And they're all like "Oh, mom just used that word!" but, they laugh because mom always goes too far. ... And not really too far, but uncomfortable, I guess.

This strategy seems related to the open and non-shaming characteristics of participants' discourses.

Using media examples. Participants frequently referred to media examples as something that would lead both parents and children to initiate conversations related to sexual assault. Courtroom and crime shows, news stories, and song lyrics were most frequently mentioned as catalysts for conversations about the realities of sexual assault, rape myths, and depictions of gender roles. One mother described conversations with her son where:

...We were looking at gender issues, like gender stereotype issues and how things are sold. So, like, for instance, looking at car commercials, and how come all the car

commercials have—and he would use this language, “dress sexy,” “women that are dressed sexy selling the cars.” ... Why do men have to be, as he says, “buff”? “Why do men have to be buff and have a ... six pack to get a girl?”

Another mother reported:

And if there was something on tv, you know how often that’s that whole “alley” thing which is not what happens most of the time, but if somebody was being attacked in an alley, I would be able to explain to them, “that’s not how it usually happens. Although that does happen, that’s not the majority of cases of sexual assault.” And it would give me that opportunity to talk about it there. And if we were watching a movie they were much more open to listen to it than me just bringing it up, out of the blue.

While this parent described her children as more receptive to hearing about rape myths when brought up in the context of a movie, many parents reported feeling or being told that they “make movies and watching television no fun” or that they “ruin everything” because of the frequency with which they point out inaccurate or biased depictions wherever they occur.

Encouraging Questioning. When conversations were not initiated by the child, the majority of parents described encouraging their children to “question everything” and often made use of “educational” and “teachable moments.” One participant reported that she tried, “...as much as I can, to ask the questions to let them do the thinking and ... come to the conclusions.”

Another participant explained:

... I don’t respond by telling him what he ought to believe, ’cause, you know, nothing will really get through to a kid if you’re just telling him, “well, you oughta believe this” or “this is what you should think.” ’Cause then they just go “uh huh” and they just nod. So ... I turn it around on him and I ask him, “well, what do you think about that?” ... I

make him explain to me why that's wrong, that way he's more invested in the answer. He's claiming the answer as his own point of view, rather than just getting it as a hand-me-down from Dad. So that's how I handle it, is, I set him up to rebel against that point of view by asking him where he sits with it.

Sometimes these set ups might be fairly obvious to the children, who might respond in particularly adolescent fashion. One participant shared how

... a conversation or something will come up, and I will, instead of just coming right out with, with my opinion or how I feel, I'll often kind of throw a feeler out or a challenge question to see how he'll respond to it. ... and so I will ask questions "what do you think of that person [in the news] who's accused of sexual assault? What do you think of that?" And so sometimes my son will say, like, a [sarcastic tone] "do you think I'm stupid, Mom? Like, I know what you do."

Challenging. Posing challenges to a statement or viewpoint, whether it was promoted by a media or authority figure or one's child, often accompanied the questioning strategy. Parents challenged the news or depictions in movies, as shown above; parents also challenged their children. Many of the challenges were in response to rape myths, to which all of the parents reported that their children had been exposed in varying extents. The tone of these challenges ranged from gentle to firm. One participant explained,

Victim-blaming is a big constant ... even in my own kids, because they're still just learning and growing and whatever, and you know if something happens to one of their friends they automatically kind of go to that victim-blaming place. And so, I just constantly tell them "it is not their fault, and you need to put yourself in their shoes, and you need to think of what you would have done in the situation and think of some

alternative, you know, ways to process this information. And how do we turn it back around on the person? You know it comes back to that, not ‘what was she wearing that caused him to rape her?’ It’s more like, ‘why did he rape her in the first place?’ Let’s ask that question and see what kind of answers we can come up with for that.”

Many parents cited examples where they specifically challenged their children about conceptualizations of gender. One father relayed this anecdote:

We came home from work one day and the kids were sitting in the hall with a big box of crayons and the three older ones were sitting there, and they had split the colors up into two piles and I said, “What are you guys doing?” They said, “We’re separating the colors.” And I said, ... “how are you separating them?” And they said, [laughing] “These are the boy colors and these are the girl colors.” [laughs] Oh my gosh. Nooooo! You know, and I want to say, if I wasn’t aware of this stuff it never would have occurred to me, I would have been like “Yeah, that looks like you got it right” you know? [Laughing] And you know, being immersed in this work, I was like “No, they’re just colors. There’s no such thing.”

While parents frequently explained less-than-desired behavior in their children, such as viewing gender in terms of opposites or repeating derogatory statements made by peers, as being “innocent” or “typical” in relation to their developmental level, they generally chose to address them in the moment nonetheless through challenging their ideas about categories and truths.

Providing access to information. Participants indicated a variety of venues and routes through which their children could access accurate information, most particularly in relation to sexuality. From multiple “dinner table conversations” about sex, sexual assault and social justice, to connecting their children with trusted adults with whom they might be more

comfortable speaking, to providing them with books directly or making sure that they were left in conspicuous places, the participating parents made accurate, age-appropriate, and non-shaming information available to their children. One mother shared:

[My daughter] is getting to an age where I don't think she really wants to have a lot of those [sex] talks with her mom. ... So one of the things I was planning on doing this summer when we go to visit [my sister] ... is to... talk to my sister about going out for an aunt-niece lunch or something and maybe introducing some of these more sensitive things that [my daughter] is not super thrilled at the thought of talking to me about. So, I think there are ways to get some of that. And I think it's the same with [my son]. I think he's more comfortable talking to [my husband] than he would be with me.

Another participant reported:

[My younger daughter] is around for a lot of conversations that I have with her older sister and she tends to sit there quietly listening, she's a big sponge. But she, like, totally took the *Our Bodies, Ourselves* book, ... that was gone for two weeks. ...that's more of her style, to get the book and read it, not necessarily talk to me as openly as her older sister.

The variety of routes available allowed parents to meet the needs of a variety of learning styles favored by the children and to match the comfort level of both parent and child.

Supports and barriers. Though not technically strategies, a few themes came up in participants' narratives that are relayed here because participants described them as playing an important role in how they went about creating a discourse with their children. They are grouped under the themes of *supports* and *barriers* because they have the potential to enhance or impede parents' comfort and ability to create a discourse about sexual assault.

Spouses. Married participants described their spouses and themselves as partners and “a team” and that their children benefited from them being able to model relationships built on shared feminist values like mutual respect and an equitable division of labor. Some of the mothers described how they were grateful that their children, and particularly their sons, had male role models within the family that would challenge sexism and rape supportive attitudes. As one mother explained:

... In all of these conversations [my husband] is, if not the one to bring things up, he definitely chimes in with, you know, the boy perspective in a very positive way, so ... I'm not always just the one, then. ... And I think that's good that it's not just the mom doing this.

The participants who described their spouses as not supportive in the creation of a discourse about sexual assault (the majority of whom were no longer married to each other) sometimes felt burdened or alone in the responsibility to carry the discourse out.

... Their dad leaves all of this piece to me, and they know that, and I wish that he would share some of that with them but he doesn't. ... sometimes I feel like I have more responsibility with my children in this environment than he does.

A couple of participants discussed feeling that their former spouses sometimes conveyed opposing messages to their children, such as homophobic attitudes, that were antithetical to the discourse the participant sought to create.

Work support. Colleagues and other people with experience in the field could also be an important source of support for participants and helpful to them in figuring out how to approach issues they struggled with or fears and anxieties about their children's well-being. Colleagues could be a good source of reality testing, reassurance, and solidarity. One mother stated:

So, it's always checking and balancing your parenting skills, and if I can't do that with my spouse, then I have to sometimes check and balance that against my other coworkers and things like that, and say "Am I being overprotective? What do you think?"

Another participant shared her experience of her daughter getting ready to go to college:

... I was so excited for her, but the week before she left I started having a lot of trouble with it, she didn't know this, but I would come in here and talk to my colleagues 'cause we're all very supportive of each other. ... the clinical supervisor here is a very dear friend of mine, and she has kids as well, and was kind of going through the same thing.

... And she just reminds me, "you gave her a good foundation, she knows what to do."

However, some participants described a lack of support that was specific to parenting in the field. One father, who had been highly involved in a men's anti-rape group prior to his son's birth, reported:

I found once he was born and once I managed to make it to a meeting of the group that I was involved in ... it was difficult for me because my issues at the moment weren't ... simply the ... anti-rape issues. My issues were parenting ... when I tried to bring in ... what I was going through, which, being the parent of a newborn child was pretty all involved and stressful, the men I was working with seemingly had no interest in the parenting aspect of the thing. And I pulled back ... because parenting was far more important to me at that point than doing the anti-rape work and there was a tug between the two in that sense.

Another father, who had found supportive colleagues, still found the need for more systemic supports in place for parents in the field.

I think we should target parents and professionals who are parents to help talk about some of these things, ... I think there should be some support, because we really are the ones preparing ourselves for the world. And I didn't know where to turn to other than other colleagues and say, "hey, I know what I'm supposed to be doing but this is what I did."

Another participant, explaining the source of his own discomfort and feelings of not always being sure how to approach certain topics that he wanted to include in his discourse with his children, shed some light on how parents' knowledge and abilities from the field might not always translate into their interactions with their children. He stated:

Because I'm talking to and about people that I really care deeply about. You know, as a probation officer I could talk to victims all day long and get really intimate details about what, how they were victimized, and I could write it down and put it in a court report.

But when I start thinking about that happening to one of my kids, or my kids being on the offender side of it, it's an entirely different conversation and I don't know, it just makes me very uneasy.

While discussions with one's children might be similar in content to discussions with clients, they might pose a different emotional challenge to parents that they do not have as much experience handling, suggesting another area where these parents could benefit from additional support. Many participants in the study were also curious as to what other participants had said and during study recruitment there was a wide outpouring of interest in participating and learning the outcomes of the study, suggesting that there is desire in the field for more information about the effects on parenting.

Cultural norms and teachings. The two participants who reported their racial identity as half Native American both reported that they drew from the traditions of their cultural heritage in the creation of their discourse about sexual assault and that these traditions supported this discourse and provided guidance to them for how to go about transmitting important values. One stated:

I think that's where my culture plays a part, you know, because something I've tried to put into place ... is how I would imagine a woman carrying herself or when I'm talking to my son, how a man would carry himself. You know, "honesty, commitment, compassion, hard-working, educated, skilled, disciplined. You know, that these are things you can expect to have in place for yourself when you become a man or a woman." ... that's the way my Elders have said, "this is how we guide our children toward those values and principles that they aren't exhibiting yet. You don't guide them by telling them ... they're not exhibiting them, you guide them by telling them that this is what you will exhibit when you get to that point."

The other participant shared:

I'm Ojibwe/Chippewa Indian, and we have that as a tribal tradition, that the role of male strength in the family is a protective role. It's not a "head-of-the-household, my way goes, I'm in control, I'm the last word or else" role. It's considered to be an egalitarian asset, so that our family relationships in our traditional way are based on egalitarian relationships between men and women, between boys and girls. So I am able to pass that along, too. So it's not just in a gender way, but in a cultural way, this has all become congruent.

However, cultural traditions could also be incongruent with a discourse about sexual assault. The participant who reported her racial identity as Asian wondered about the role her ethnicity played in shaping the discourse she had created with her daughter and her comfort level in speaking with her about sex. She reported:

So I feel we kind of quite open to talk about this, but I think I, at this point, I don't feel like I want to ask her, "have you had any sexual experience" or "are you sexually active?" I don't know, I just, I don't feel like I can talk with her like that. She's not talking to me, you know, or telling me anything, and I don't want to feel like I want to fish information from her. I don't know whether is this related to my job or is this related to my ethnic, ethnicity? ... I think for me growing up my, mom and I don't, didn't talk too much about sexuality and sex ed, you know. So, I support my daughter to, like, learn safety and learn sex ed and all that and I buy her books and all that, but I don't feel I have a lot of ... conversation with her about that. I'm not sure is this related to my ethnicity ... I don't know [laughs] ... if we think about traditional Asian families, I feel like—it's not like we [participant's own family] cannot talk about it. You know, I feel like we can talk ... but I don't know any other family—are they ... talking a lot?

Though not specific to a racial or ethnic group, the rape supportive culture of the United States at large also came up as a barrier in that is pervasive and deeply entrenched. While parents could try to limit their children's exposure to certain types of media where rape myths are endemic and fight for an alternative worldview through their childrearing and their career, they had no way of completely insulating their children from being "bombarded with all these messages" that justify and encourage sexual violence. With this ultimate inability to keep their

children unaffected by the rape supportive culture in mind, the reader will now be presented with parents' reasons why they created the discourses that they did.

The Reasons for a Discourse

This section examines why the participants in this study have made a discourse about sexual assault part of their child-rearing practice. Through open and axial coding of participants' narratives, the following theory emerged: parents acted as they did because of the *knowledge and awareness* they gained through their involvement in the field, the desire to *prevent perpetration of or victimization from sexual assault* among their children, and to effectively *prepare their children for the world* as it is, rather than how they wished it to be.

Knowledge and awareness. Participants' narratives revealed themes of being highly influenced by their experiences in the sexual assault-related fields. The knowledge and awareness they gained from this work shaped the discourses these parents created and, in most cases, parents speculated, catalyzed them. As one father stated, "we had a particular emphasis on supporting non-violence, supporting respect ... that from my side, at least, came out of, you know, my background relating to anti-rape work and feminist issues in general." Another participant reported:

As they get older... I'm definitely having conversations that I never in a million years would have had ... with either my daughter or my sons. And I don't think it would even be something that comes up at the dinner table, and yet it does now on a regular basis.

Some parents described the work as "part of me," suggesting internalization and self-transformation through their work experience. They wondered who they might have been as parents if they had not been in the field. As one mother explained:

It's hard to say... what I would have done differently if I hadn't had the knowledge or the background or whatever. But, I would imagine, just thinking about human nature, that I probably would not think about saying something when ... my kids' friends call another girl a slut or something like that. ... I don't know if that would have even occurred to me that that was problematic. So I'm sure it's altered. And I think I tried to essentially raise kids that, you know, are thoughtful and not judgmental about other people. Because we never know their circumstances and never know what's happened to them to cause whatever's going on and we always have to remember that. And I feel like a lot of those messages that I don't know if I would have been as sensitive to if I was like an accountant or something, just because I don't know if I would have had the opportunity to really think about it. ... I would have been aware of racism and probably heterosexism and homophobia, I think I probably would have been aware of that, but I don't know if I would have sort of understood why we need to address them and say something, especially when kids are little.

Voicing this theme of internalization and its influence, another mother stated:

...so, I think with sexual assault, sexuality, work, you know, grappling with women's issues and women's identity and women's development and women's psychological development, absolutely, I used all that knowledge in raising my daughters. But it's also part of me, it's hard for me to separate like, well, what is—all of this of stuff that I've been involved with and learned about and studied and absorbed comes out of me naturally, so, absolutely it's there and absolutely it's an influence, but it's me. So, yeah, maybe if I had gone down a different professional route I would be a very different parent.

Though this data is speculative in nature, parents believed that their parenting was very heavily influenced by what they had learned in the field. Knowledge and awareness affected parents in a number of ways, as described below.

Survivors. A number of parents voluntarily disclosed that they and/or loved ones were survivors of sexual assault or relationship violence. Some mentioned this in connection to their knowledge and awareness and what they teach to their children. One mother described how her 13-year-old son knows “that mom is involved in rape prevention and domestic violence prevention. And he knows that is very serious because mom lost a friend to domestic violence.” Another mother reported:

Both my husband and I are both survivors ... and my husband is a survivor of child sexual assault. So for us since we're both survivors ourselves and knowledgeable that, of the experiences that we've experienced, and wanting to give our children a different environment, ... on a daily basis, ... not only in my professional world but in my home life, ... we're talking about it and dealing with it, both female and male victims, I guess.

However, a parent who disclosed during the interview that she was a survivor of long-term childhood sexual abuse credited working in the field as raising her awareness.

... Compared to what I thought, and how I thought the world was before I did this work, I just, like other parents, like you just kind of want to turn a blind eye because it's kind of intense and, you don't want to go there. But I feel grateful that I have, that I do go there, that I do realize what's happening.

Thus, whether or not people were coming to the work with a personal or secondary experience of sexual assault, work still was seen as enhancing awareness.

“Sometimes I know more than I wanna know.” Part and parcel of having an increased knowledge and awareness about sexual assault is the concomitant awareness of the risks that exist in the world and the ways in which one’s children are vulnerable. As one father stated, “I’ve seen the very worst that our communities can do to a kid, and you can’t help but take that home. You remember that when you see your kids and how they’re vulnerable.” The narrative excerpts presented here are examples of why parents were motivated to act and create the discourse they did because of their heightened sensitivity to vulnerability. As one participant stated, “if I wasn’t as aware of the world, if I didn’t see every single day and hear stories every single day of the horrible things that happen, would I be this parent? Probably not.” Another parent described herself as:

... more cautious, ... I’m just a little bit more cautious ... about ... where she is and who she hang out with...like I discourage her to talk with her teacher afterschool [because everyone else would have gone home]. ...I think if I’m not in this field, I may not really distinguish something so minor, like, ... if I’m a regular parent, I may not care so much, you know, if she talked to teacher after school or before school. I may not care so much about the sleepover, you know. So, ...if it is within my control, I try to minimize any potential risk for her.

Parents’ descriptions and worries about themselves as being *overprotective* and the potential for *burnout* and *increased anxiety* because of the constant exposure to trauma are addressed later.

Fear of children being victimized or perpetrating. A particularly difficult form of the awareness of vulnerability that the majority of parents in the study acknowledged was the fear of their own children being victimized by or perpetrating sexual assault. One mother shared:

I think that as a parent of a male child my worst nightmare would be that my son would ever be accused of sexual violence. So really just making sure that he's aware has always been very important to me.

Another stated:

...The older [my daughter] gets, you know, the closer to college age she gets, the more I think of her when I talk to some students ... and it's not a fun thought. ... Almost even worse for me is the thought that [my son] would be accused of committing something like sexual assault or dating violence. And that's, for me—I feel like if either of my kids were sexually assaulted, that would be horrible because I would feel for them. But I feel like it's also something I've seen so many people come through really well, and it's certainly not a life stopping incident. But I feel like committing would make me so sad, it would make me so sad. And I don't know if I would do well with that. [Laughs] And I hope that doesn't happen. I hope I'm raising a kid that, you know, of course that would never happen to. But it's hard to think about that.

I asked parents who mentioned such thoughts about how they coped with or managed them.

Along with allusions to repression and denial, many parents talked about their *hope* that they had raised their children such that their risk factors for both perpetration and victimization were reduced and protective factors increased. One participant stated:

You know, you can reduce the risk of being assaulted but you can't totally prevent it. So I do believe that they have enough knowledge and belief in themselves to make, to keep themselves as safe as they possibly can, within the realms of their own control.

Another participant responded:

I don't probably think about it much. I mean, it's occurred to me when you hear about all these stories about boys and you just start to think "oh Jesus, I have a boy." But then I think, you know—probably every parent thinks this—but I just think, you know, "I can't imagine the kind of kid I'm trying to raise ever doing something like that."

Interestingly, parents who worried about their children's potential victimization acknowledged that they knew that it was something that they could "not ultimately protect them" from despite their efforts and what they could teach them about risk reduction; the final responsibility was always laid on the choices and actions of the potential perpetrator. When parents talked about their sons' potential to perpetrate, they put more of an onus on their own childrearing to preclude such a possibility. "Because I feel ... as a mother of a son, I have more responsibility to put a caring and respectful son out there in the world, than I'm protecting a daughter from this to happen." The possible implications of this sense of responsibility will be explored more in the discussion chapter. The next section examines particular reasons or motivations participants cited that shaped the preventative measures they took.

"The best prevention ... starts at home." As difficult as their knowledge, awareness, and fears could sometimes be, the participants in the study largely faced them and responded to them proactively (along with seeking support and consultation and selectively employing some higher-level defense mechanisms to help them get through the more difficult times). Many participants' parenting practices reflected their sense of sexual assault prevention as something that can be effected through personal effort and family communication patterns. As one participant declared, "the real work is at home and on yourself and with your own kids." Another stated, "I figured the biggest place I can provide prevention is within my own children." Parents' narratives suggested a variety of reasons why they approached sexual assault prevention

through a home discourse with wide-ranging spectrum. Their discourse translates theoretically- and experience-informed knowledge about sexual assault into particular responses to gender, healthy sexuality, respect, and intersecting oppressions (among others). Four broad themes explored here are how *theory*, *gender*, *individual development*, and the possibility of *vicarious prevention* motivated participants in the creation of their discourse.

Guided by theory. Many parents presented various theoretically informed positions about rape and sexual assault prevention that have shaped or inspired their actions and discourse as parents. Parents discussed why they might have paid particular attention to areas where messages are sent about power, violence, domination and othering being more valued than respect. One mother explained:

Our culture says, “no just go to that *über*-masculine place that’s not tempered, that’s not in balance with the feminine within yourself or the feminine in the world, and just go for it.” And whether it be through videogames or through whatever, we just have this kind of like, ... just strengthen that instead of temper that. And I ... think it could produce incidents of sexual assault.

A father posited:

I think there are ... huge overlaps between all sorts of ...bad behavior, whether its sexism ... racism, or homophobia. ... I think all those issues ... have kind of a common value system ... behind them and that what we combat, you know, one type of thinking, ... we’re helping to address all of them.

Another offered a theory about

...the philosophy of a lot of sexual violence: that there’s a hierarchy of who deserves respect, who doesn’t. “I deserve it, you don’t, therefore, whatever I do to you, doesn’t

even really matter, there's no consequence to it." You know, that's part of the rape thinking, I believe.

As discussed in the section about what the participants say in their discourse, the above quotes offer some explanations as to why parents' narratives included encouraging non-rigid gender expression, non-violent conflict resolution, a commitment to social justice, and instilling respect for self and others within a discourse about sexual assault.

Yes means yes. All parents in the study provided their children with non-shaming information about sexuality, usually through a combination of discussions, access to accurate information, and modeling. Some parents explicitly linked these practices to prevention and protective factors. One mother described telling her children:

"Sex is a normal, healthy, fabulous, cool thing that happens, it's a great part of being a human. And your body is wonderful and these changes happen and ... you can make your body feel fabulous all by yourself." Those are conversations that happen all the time in my house.... And my hope, really, is that with that foundation and with that comfort when things happen ... if things happen, they're comfortable and able to just reach out and talk to somebody about it. And I think that that is a barrier that we see in so many of the survivors that we see, there's just so much shame surrounding what has happened... and it's something that needs to be kept in the dark because it's something that they never talked about anyways.

One parent spoke of his desire that he personally and society in general be able to approach talking to children about sexuality more skillfully:

There's a male educator who wrote a great book called *Reaching Men* and his name is Russ Funk. And he talks about the issue that we in society ... say what not to do for the

boys and we tell girls how to protect themselves but we never tell them what they can do. Like, how do you ask for permission, how do you take it to the next level? And he's absolutely, right ... we have to figure out how to do that more comfortably ... I've still got to figure out how to do it right [laughs].

Healthy intimate relationships were also stressed for their preventative potential. One mother reported, "I feel like knowing what a healthy relationship is, knowing what a good relationship is for you, is really a preventative measure in terms of sexual assault." A father explained the reasoning behind his ongoing conversations with his son, newly interested in girls, in which he encouraged him to look for someone who is smart and shares his interests rather than seek out dating partners based on the superficial characteristics idolized by the son's male peers:

But I think that just helping to train him as a young boy, as a young man, in to having a different set of values when it comes to male-female relationships, automatically equips him with better skills in relationships and, and reduces the chances of power and control in the relationship that he'll have.

Though not necessarily solely informed by a feminist perspective, the influence of feminism, including the more contemporary focus on the protective potential of a positive sense of sexuality, is evident in these participants' reasoning.

Guided by gender. A sense of responsibility and motivation to act was often traced to the gender of the participants' children. As one participant stated, "...I think it's my responsibility as a mother to ... grow a young man out there who will look at the world differently and look, because he has power, how he uses his power." Some of this came out of participants' awareness and fear, discussed above, about their children perpetrating or being victimized by

sexual assault. Many people described sexual assault as typically and statistically *a gendered issue* and their fears aligned with that viewpoint. The following two fathers stated:

As far as the sexual assault goes, ... I don't want my boys to be perps. I don't want my daughter to be a victim. And, like I said, I know it can go the other way, but statistically it's, that's the reality that's out there.

... I'm not worried about my son getting raped. You know, I don't live in fear of that. ... I know it can happen, I know that it does happen, I've even counseled men who have been raped by other men, but I don't think I live with that fear like I do for my kids, my girls.

In acknowledgement of the statistical reality of male perpetration, and to counteract it, the majority of participants with sons described putting an extra emphasis on their sons to “use their strength for good” by being active allies and interveners. The following excerpts from two mothers provide examples of this reasoning:

I do put a little bit more responsibility on my son as the—god, I hate to say it—but, potential offender, because he's a guy ... I guess for my son, I gave a little bit more saying “hey, as a good guy, I need you to step in when you see something from a bad guy. If it's safe for you.”

... I really make them all understand that, the power and control angle of sexual assault. Like, you know, 'cause that's really what it's all about. And I think I probably harp on that a little more with my son, ... just because he's a boy and ... he has some inherent privilege in our society. And for him to not misuse that, I guess. ... It's hard with my son because sometimes the conversation just, you know, statistically speaking, most perpetrators are male, and, but not all males are perpetrators and so I don't want him to

feel like ... he's being picked on or anything, but I also just want him to be aware that he does have that power over people and he just needs to, I guess, use it for good and not evil.

One father described how having male children "guided and motivated" him in his work in the field:

My kids are both boys, which makes this work very intentional for me. Because it means that I have to think about the kind of world that we're creating for them to grow up in, and it also means I'm thinking about the kind of men that they will turn into someday.

Another father relayed how his son's gender spurred him to act and approach the issue of men's violence as something detrimental to men and women alike, rooted in the hypermasculization that has grown out of men's competition with other men.

I think it's obvious that [my son] being male that we felt a need to deal with the fact that men, and boys ... easily behave inappropriate with girls or with other boys in terms of sexual assault, domestic violence, just violence issues in general. ... I don't think that we just saw it as a thing relating to sexual assault as boys and men ... potentially behaving inappropriately with women alone. ... I'm not trying to minimize the issue of sexual assault, but I think that we were also very aware from an early age that the issues relating to that often related to men fighting other men, men attacking other men, men needing to be on top....

Several parents reported having or gaining an awareness of the risks boys and men face through their experience in the field, and expressed some regrets and/or embarrassment in the interview that they currently do not or did not in the past feel the same urgency about protecting their sons from the risk of sexual assault as they did with their daughters. One mother stated:

Even though I know sexual assault and sexual abuse happens to boys, so much more of it happens to girls, well, from what we see. And I think being a female myself, I knew I had to protect this child, and I think that's probably why I started talking to her so much younger. Although now we're seeing a whole bunch of male cases coming forward and things like that. But, I don't know, maybe I was younger and less educated then ... I do think it was subconscious and maybe just being female to female I felt this need to protect her from all of that and I didn't give as much weight to it for the boys, which I should have, now, looking back. But, it just kinda happened that way, without a whole lot of thought.

Another mother who presented some concerns about this issue stated;

... I'm trying to be helpful, but I'm being very gendered with this topic. ... it's hard not to be, ... I mean, I understand there's all the reasons why I should be less gendered but it's hard, especially when it's your kids.

Yet some parents appeared to be mostly reconciled with the need for gender-differentiated messages. One father speculated,

... as embarrassed as I am to say so, ... if my son when he was fifteen or sixteen was having one-on-one flirtatious conversations with girls, I guess I wouldn't have had the same level of concern ... in part because ... I know my son, and I know he wouldn't ... cross any boundaries as far as disrespecting a woman's or girl's wishes. ... Certainly, you know, sexual assault is such a gendered issue, I think that the information that our young girls need to get is very different than the information that our young boys need to get.

It bears noting that most parents who did describe a gendered bent to their messages when talking about sexual assault also talked about teaching all their children, regardless of gender, about their right to their own boundaries, the difference between good and inappropriate touch, and only engaging in sexual activity when they are ready and free from peer pressure, all of which serve preventative and protective purposes. These parents were not unaware of boys' and men's vulnerability to sexual abuse and assault, but they readily acknowledged different emphases and motivations depending on their children's gender when teaching specifically about sexual assault.

Discrepant gender influence. Not all parents endorsed their child's gender as influential. Three parents stated that gender was not a factor or only a slight factor in the messages they imparted to their children. While these parents did seem to present more gender neutral information than the parents who stated outright that gender was a major influence, at other points in their narratives they did identify some ways gender had affected their decision making. The following excerpts juxtapose their responses to a question about the role of gender with a later part of their narrative that suggested gender did figure in to some of their decision making. One parent stated, "I feel like she should know [about sexual assault] regardless ... male or female. ... I do not feel like I need her to know certain thing more just because she is a woman." Later this parent reported having signed her daughter up for a class about relationship violence and self-defense so the daughter would "understand the safety for a woman." A parent who described gender as "only slightly" influential and that she mainly talked to her children, one son and one daughter, together, providing the same information to both, later described some gendered divide in the values related to sexual assault that she wants them to have:

When it comes to my son, that forcing someone to have sex with you is not the way to interact with someone. ... For my daughter, ... how to protect herself from it happening. And then, for both of them ... if it does happen, to be able to talk about what happened, that it shouldn't be a secret, that it needs to be talked about so we can help them.

The participant with the least gendered divide in her narrative identified as a survivor of sexual assault whose husband was also a survivor of sexual assault. Her worries about her children's safety were mainly gender-neutral and more based on family experience (her son reaching the same age as her husband when he was assaulted was a particularly scary time). However, she did identify gender's influence in her hesitancy to allow her daughter to join Facebook: "I just have seen so many nasty things happen, especially to girls. So I guess yeah, there's where gender, there's a case where gender makes a difference." She also stated:

... I believe and know that women can be perpetrators as well as men and as well as the victims can be of both gender. So, we try to be gender neutral on that, although, on the perpetrator part, ... when we're talking about adult victims it's more likely to be a male perpetrator, so we do often use the male pronoun there.

This quote, and the whole subsequent section, provide some elucidation of the complex nature of the influence of gender on participants' narratives and the various ways it can be inextricable from discourses about sexual assault even when parents intentionally aim to neutralize it. This data has been presented not to "catch participants in the act of being gendered" or to pass judgment on how or why they approach this issue. As so many of them stated, sexual assault "is a gendered issue," with statistics showing that men make up the vast majority of perpetrators and women have a one in four chance of lifetime victimization. Yet the participants' various

struggles with this issue in regard to their own children reflects a problem the field faces in general about inclusivity and validation, which one of the participants identified:

... Men are a marginalized community when you're talking about sexual assault response. There, we don't have, like, a support group for men. We don't have, you know, we're very cautious when we're taking crisis calls from men because a lot of times they are abusers just trying to get information. Or you know, we're very cautious, and so there's a, as a population of survivors, they're very marginalized. And if it's one in six men who've been abused as children and one in four women, you know, it's still a very large segment of the population and they're not being served.

This issue is one of the dialectical issues of sexual assault for which it is difficult to arrive at synthesis.

Guided by the child. Gender was far from the only determining factor that played a role in the parents' reasons for why they created the discourses they did, and though it is outside the realm of this analysis to try to parse out quantitatively what characteristics were most salient and when, a theme that arose from all 16 of the participants was that the developmental level and experiences of their child or children was an impetus for the content of their discourse.

Sometimes conversations were spurred by behaviors that parents found concerning: "And so, I've had those discussions with ... my 17-year-old, starting when she was 14 and 15. Because of how she was, what she was experiencing, what behavior she was modeling, things of that nature." One father reported:

The first time I had to ... talk directly [about sexual assault] was with my sixteen year old daughter ... She grew up with ... her older siblings having all kinds of freedom, ... boys were over at the house all the time, and it was just a very comfortable, relaxed

atmosphere. Well, she kind of extended that comfortable, relaxed attitude with everyone, everywhere she went. ... She just didn't mind having long one-on-one conversations with guys from her age up to ... several years older than her.

Many parents noted children's ages, intellectual processing, experience with puberty, interest and ability to date, and life-stage changing events, such as entering middle school or high school, as reasons why they talked as they did and when, or, in some cases, why they had not yet done so. For instance, a father who described his discourse as not as thorough as he wanted it to be explained that as due partially to "their age, 'cause they're not dating yet, and ... I think that when they start crossing that bridge I'm going to have very direct conversations with them both..." Another participant explained:

... it seems like when they hit junior high age, ... their friendships and their relationships and everything, their whole world becomes a little more complicated. And so that's the time that a bunch of questions start coming in, just about all kinds of different things in the world.

One parent, whose discourse was more centered on safety than direct discussions about sexual assault, talked about her daughter's personality and experience level as part of the reason she did not feel a need to get more in depth about the risks she might face. She stated:

My daughter doesn't date, so I don't have this problem [laughs]...because of how she is reduce a lot of my worries. You know, I don't need to worry about her doing drugs, you know, and I don't believe that she's doing all these things behind my back that I don't know, you know. So I don't feel like I need to worry about her dating or something. But if she is dating, then ... I would talk with her about, like, date rape and that kind of thing.

Personality was also referenced in explanations of why parents might talk differently to one child than another, which interacted at times with the gender theme previously discussed. One participant stated:

And part of it was his personality. [My daughter] is extremely bright, and always wanting to learn more and more, where [my son] growing up ... getting him to do his homework was a huge deal, he always wanted to be outside running around, playing with his great imagination. So I think ... he and I never really had deep conversations about anything, where [my daughter] and I always could.

Another parent reported:

... I worry more about my daughter and I don't think that's more about her gender but more about her willingness to take risks and not be as aware of the consequences. I don't think that has to do with their gender, that has to do with who she is in general.

One parent, talking about the effects that the discourse about sexual assault had on her children, speculated that she might have created a different type of discourse if her children had presented with different personality traits:

I wouldn't say my kids are overly anxious about this. I don't think they worry about it, they're not fearful children. But if, you know, if I had had a different kind of kid who was really fearful and who ... would react to some of this kind of suggestive information then I might not have been as open with my children about some of this stuff.

Responding to the needs of the child was particularly salient for all of the participants who disclosed that one of their children had special needs and that, while their parenting of these children was still informed by their sexual assault work, their discourse with them about it was different than with their typically developing children. For the most part, these parents answered

the interview questions in reference to their other child or children, so there is only minimal data about their particular discourse with these children.

Guided by all children. The majority of parents cited their children's peers when describing why they focused on communicating certain messages or values to their children. More than a third of participants talked about their hopes and beliefs that what they talked about and taught to their children would have a ripple effect into the lives' of the people their children encounter, making the world safer from sexual assault and a better place for survivors. As one participant stated "because ... I talk to my kids and they talk to their friends, their friends are educated. And so I think in that way that it's sort of vicarious prevention or vicarious education." Another participant reported:

There are very few people I meet who have not personally been affected by sexual violence ... it's such a big part of life for so many people. And my kids are going to encounter it time and again, and whether they encounter it as victims or as support people, I think it is so important that they have the tools to help somebody, to talk to somebody, to give you know, good advice, to lend a nonjudgmental ear. ... they [survivors] need to be surrounded by people that can help them, support them in the way that they need to be supported. And that's nonjudgmental, non-blaming, and available.

And so, I want my kids to be those people for whoever in their lives they encounter.

A number of parents mentioned that their children would talk to them about related issues going on in their friends' lives, so parents would help them process this information and talk about how they can support them. One participant explained,

With the older boys we've had more involved conversations because ... they're teenagers and ... have friends of theirs ... talking about having been sexually abused, things like that, so there is more in their life.

Another parent stated:

... You know how kids talk, they come home and they have all these, "well this happened to so and so and this is crazy and whatever." I'll sit down and talk to them and say "yeah, that was a sexual assault and this person may be a rapist and here's what's probably going to happen through the court system to that person. Here's the steps that the victim you know, could possibly take to help heal. And what can you do as a friend?" if it was a friend of theirs. Unfortunately it seems like a lot of the kids I work with ... have personal experience with sexual assault and I'm a firm believer that the more information the better.

Another motivation for parents was to help their children counteract negative messages from peers, both for their child's sake and that of others. Many parents talked about peers in general as a source of rape supportive and/or misogynist thinking (imbibed through the culture at large) and their children's potential to interrupt and challenge those view points. One parent stated,

... My sons are already developing respectful understandings and attitudes about women. They check their friends and they come home and they tell about it, when their friends start saying things that are negative or derogatory or, or where women's bodies are sexualized, and they're saying "that's not funny." Or, "cut it out," or they do all this stuff that I wish ... everybody would do. And they seem to be doing it really well.

In summation, all the parents in this study spoke of their desire to effect prevention in a number of ways, and while they were most focused on the safety and safe actions of their own children, many of them also viewed it as beneficial to their children's peers as well.

Preparation for the world as it is. Even as participants sought to effect positive change in the world, they were well acquainted with the numerous dangers and injustices that their children could potentially face. The final overarching theme I identified in participants' narratives that answers the question of why they created a discourse with their children about sexual assault was their belief that they needed to prepare their children for the world, risks and all, because of the realities of those risks in their children's lives. One father described how he felt he had been too guarded and overbearing when his children were younger because he had been so scared, but stated that more recently, he "decided that instead of protecting my children from the world I'm going to start preparing them for the world." To do this, parents had to let go of some of their efforts to prevent their children from exposure to risk and pain, including just the knowledge and awareness of these.

Unfortunately necessary knowledge. Though the majority of parents had chosen to talk very frequently and specifically with their children about sexual assault and related issues and believed that this was the right thing to do, there could still be some ambivalence or sadness about having to introduce these things to their children and concerns about the emotional or psychological effects of bringing them up. As one father explained,

I feel like we kind of take them out of that protective bubble that you try to keep them in as long as possible when they're kids, so, I don't know. I have mixed feelings about the whole thing. ... The reality is that they're away from us most of the day anyway, even in middle school, so as much as we can do to prepare them for what they're going to face

out in the world, I think that they're going to end up being stronger individuals for it. ... I feel that we have to tell them the truth, and so, I guess that that part of it kind of erases their innocence a little bit. But I do think that in preparing them to be adults and to help them grow on their own and to be ready for what they are going to hear when we're not around, I think that we're doing the right thing by telling them.

Some parents counteracted their desire to shelter their children from the knowledge of sexual assault by noting the toll that sheltering their children could exact. As one mother explained, "you just have to know that protecting your child can be just as dangerous and can even make them even more vulnerable." A few parents talked about the general public's ignorance about sexual and relationship violence and were motivated to make sure their children would not be naïve about its pervasiveness. As this participant shared,

It's amazing how many people don't think that sexual assault happens in our community, or that domestic violence happens and, I just feel like, by having that knowledge and by pointing that out to my children all the time or whatever, I hope that I'm preparing them. It's a cold, hard world, and the more knowledge they have and the more tools they have to deal with that, the better.

Thus parents in this study accepted the reality of sexual assault (which is not to be confused with approving of it). Taking the view point of sexual assault being a reality that their children would face in some manner at some point in their lives, the vast majority of participants found that an in-depth while age-appropriate knowledge of the issue was better for their children than concerns about their "innocence."

Knowing what to do. Another preparation theme that emerged was that the majority of parents wanted to make sure, in the case of an assault, their children would be willing and able to

talk to someone about it and get help. The openness parents described in their narratives of how they enacted their discourses is also connected to this desire, with parents seeking “to create a positive environment where they’re able to feel comfortable to talk, should something happen.” Some parents talked about why they had certain conversations or used certain language in relation to this scenario. Two participant examples are provided below:

... We have also talked about differences between reporting versus tattling, and what things need to be reported, so I guess we do that. And we try to bring home that “it is never ok to be hurt or watch someone else be hurt, and those are things to immediately tell an adult and keep telling until someone knows.” So, you know, we do talk about that a lot. ... we’re practicing it at simple levels so that they’re more prepared for the intense levels.

And I actually taught them to use the right body part words, because that’s how I was always trained. And my mother thought that was weird ... thought I was sharing too much with the kids. Yeah, I did it anyway though because ... I know sometimes how hard it is when these young children will end up, like, at the child advocacy center and be using all fancy words for something. Then they have to explain to the investigator what they’re really talking about, and I see them go through so many more extra steps that, if they were able to say the word vagina or penis, that would cut out probably ten questions.

While this sort of preparation was to help the child be able to navigate experiencing an assault in the most harm reducing way by seeking the appropriate medical care and emotional support, providing this type of preparation also seemed to be something that could ease some of the anxiety these parents faced, which was heightened by knowing the statistical frequency of sexual assault, how the rape supportive culture sends victim-blaming and shaming messages that deter

people from seeking help, and that the parents had no way of guaranteeing their children would not be victimized. One mother stated,

If I'm talking to a student ... that really reminds me of [my daughter], they'll come in my head and usually I just think "well, you know, I hope I raised a kid who is okay coming in and talking to whoever it is they can get help from, like this student did."

Another parent shared:

I hope that by this time I've given them enough information and continue to do so that ... if something does happen to them they'll feel comfortable coming to me for help. Or that they will know where to go for help. Or they'll know how to help a friend if it happens to them.

The participants in this study stressed their *hope* for best outcomes, including preventing, as much as possible, their children from perpetrating or being victimized by sexual assault and, if victimized, preparing them to manage that experience in the most health-promoting way; aware of their ultimate inability to protect their children from assault, they nonetheless created discourses with their children about sexual assault to proactively support these hopes. While providing the "best foundation" possible through raising their children with prevention and preparation in mind was not enough to take away all the fear that parents experience, providing this foundation was a way to counterbalance it. One father stated,

I've gotten better over it. You know, it's not an overwhelming fear anymore. It's a realistic fear, so I try to educate them, I try to talk with them, I try to monitor where they're at. ... I've just learned to let go, and I have to trust their judgment. I have to trust in my parenting, ... that the core messages have gotten through. ... And then they leave [the house] and I have a panic attack until they come back.

Parents' anxiety, along with other issues raised in their narratives, are discussed further in the following section.

The Good, The Bad, and The Complex

This section examines parents' reflections about being a parent in the field, the discourse they created, and issues that posed challenges to them. The title of this section reflects the parents' perceptions of their experience, and is not intended as a judgment on the part of the researcher.

The benefits of being a parent and working in a sexual assault-related field. When asked about the pros and cons of their dual role as a parent and worker in the sexual assault field, participants reported the positives as outweighing the negative aspects of their situations. The most commonly named benefit was parents' increased awareness about sexual assault. This was viewed as a positive because it led to the ability to put protective factors in place, increased the openness between them and their children, helped them stay connected with the realities of life that teenagers face, and gave them knowledge, attitudes, and values to pass on to their children that might reduce their risk of being assaulted or assaulting. One parent who works with college students stated:

I feel like I'm pretty in tune with the realities of teenage life. I think I hear a lot ... about stuff that goes on and I'm pretty aware. ... I have a lot of friends that have kids my kids' age and I feel like they have no clue, [laughing] ... they're in for a rude awakening I feel like. ... And so I'm pretty aware and hopefully sensitive and as the kind of parent that the kids can say, talk to and feel okay coming to with their questions.

A number of participants reported that engaging in this work had improved their relationship with their spouse and provided them with the opportunity to model healthy,

equitable relationships to their children. Being in the field also provided parents with the opportunity to model commitment to social justice and the importance of contributing to the betterment of society through one's work as well as the opportunity to introduce their children to colleagues and acquaintances from the field, who served as positive role models. A parent shared,

I work with so many people that are involved in this work in some way or another that I've become great friends with. And that has enriched our lives, I think, so much. It has just given my kids access to people that are working to make a difference, to see everyday, to talk everyday with people that are just so engaged, and just really good, good people with great hearts. ... I believe that that will really ... help to instill great values in them as they grow older and they become adults. ... that's been really amazing, to be able to connect my family to this work and to these people....

Many parents described their children as empathic, confident, savvy people who stood up against injustice and held healthy attitudes towards sexuality; a number of parents used a variation of the phrase "they just get it" when describing their children's understanding of the elements of a rape supportive culture and how to challenge it. Examples of their children's approach to sexual assault showed remarkable sensitivity, empathy, and insightfulness.

...We have a walk every year it's a big fundraiser and there's like, you know, 1500 people that come together to walk, and you know, everybody gets a shirt and, walk for ... sexual violence. And the shirt said, like something like "I'm walking for ____" and it left a space for you to write why you were walking. And, my son was like, "I don't know why I'm walking" and I was, you know, I said, "Well, why are you here? Like, what's important?" ... and so he ended up writing on his shirt "my mom." And I said, "Oh" I

said, “so you’re walking because I work here and I made you come?” And he said, “No, I’m walking because you’re a survivor.” And I had never directly had a conversation with my son about myself being a survivor, and that was just really, a huge awakening to me ... that he knew, like, you know, because, I’m not a—very open with that ... I think it was hard for him to acknowledge that with me. But he wanted to say that it was important to him. And I think the conversations that followed after that have just been really rich, and ... we used that more to talk about his behavior and what his experiences will be.

Another participant relayed the story of a conversation he and his older son had following a retreat for survivors that the interviewee and his wife hold annually. For the most part their children were kept on the periphery of the proceedings, interacting with the attendees only during the more social events of the retreat. He explained:

But there was time at the very end when everybody was saying their goodbyes and we were having a closing session that he came into the room, and he saw the women, they were at the end of this amazing weekend together, and he saw them and several of them were crying. And I asked him later on ... how he felt about that because I wanted to know if it had upset him. You know, I don’t want to expose them to anything traumatic, I don’t mind them understanding the issue, but I don’t want them to be traumatized at a young age by more than they can handle. So, I asked him about it, and he asked me a little bit about why the women were crying. And I was telling them about some of the effects of sexual violence, that it can cause sometimes physical injuries, that it can cause emotional injuries, things like nightmares and panic attacks and depression and that that’s what some of the women were dealing with. And ... these are women who have become

friends of his and he cares about very, very much. And I wanted to know if it upset him to see women that he cared about expressing that kind of hurt. So I asked him, “What do you think about that? Does that bother you?” And he thought about it, and he said, “No, because I know that they have to cry so that they can get rid of some of those feelings. And I know that once they cry and they’ve let some of that out, then good things can come back into them and take the place of those bad things.” So he said, “I’m sorry that they have to cry about it, but I’m glad that they can cry about it, because it will make them better, stronger people, and that’s a good thing.” And so I thought, well, here he is ... coming into age 11, and that was his perspective on it ... if he’s got that figured out then maybe a person his age with enough guidance really can understand this issue and put it in context. Maybe he can psychologically and emotionally understand what’s going on ... he can see the crime as a grievous thing, but he can see the survivors as wonderful and whole and remarkable people. So I was glad because it showed me that he saw strengths in survivors. So that was the moment that really, I think, showed me that he is aware of the issue and is capable of processing it.

The children’s words speak for themselves about what can be fostered within a discourse of sexual assault.

The negative aspects of being a parent doing this work. While the study participants generally agreed that working in sexual assault-related fields being good for parenting, the cons they listed, as well as other issues and difficulties that came up in their narratives should not be dismissed or minimized. Commonly cited cons were *burnout*, being *anxious* or *worried*, and being *overprotective*.

Potential for burnout. Descriptions that could be coded under the theme of *burnout* were commonly cited as a negative effect of participants' work. While burnout is a well-known occupational hazard in all fields that involve frequent exposure to trauma, a number of parents reported being particularly affected when they were working with or helping children similar in age or manner to their own. As one participant stated,

I think burnout is very apparent any time I have to deal with children ... I have met 12-year-old, 13-year-old, 14-year-old survivors that are just like my children and that rips my heart out every time. I think when I see that, I come home and I hug my kids and I wish that I didn't have to see that kind of stuff because that is just really heart breaking for me. And I think that happens a lot more than I would like it to happen.

Around a third of parents talked about it being "hard to turn off" or separate from their work (and indeed, for parents who answered crisis line calls, such a separation was physically impossible as they needed to be able to respond to calls and/or leave the house to join a survivor at the hospital) and this could intrude into their family life by requiring them to be away from the house, feel emotionally exhausted upon returning home after a rough day, or have a hard time watching a movie or television show with their kids. (More frequently, their children did not enjoy watching with them because the parent would point out the rape myths or sexism in the programming). One participant described herself as "...so hyper-aware of things, you know? Like, one comment from my son is, '... you can't watch something that you're not overanalyzing.'" One parent did not want to transmit the cynicism that can be a part of burnout to her daughter:

... when I go home I want to be a mom. I don't want to be always like therapist mom, you know? So, ... I don't want, because of my profession and I'm jaded, you know, and then I go home and give this jaded view ... to my child.

A couple of parents mentioned how their children would pick up on their moods after a rough episode at work and become worried or want to fix it. Speaking about her children, one mother stated, "... inevitably one of them says that they want to find a magic button to make all the bad things in the world go away." Another participant reported:

...if I've had a bad day I tend to isolate. That's how I cope, and so they know about that. ... if it was hard call, they just know. 'Cause ... I'm inward and I'll just spend a little more time away from them, and they know. They more, they worry about me more than anything, so I guess I don't share, like, the present time details with them because I think it scares them at times.

These elements have the potential to take a serious toll on a parent's ability to continue working in the field as well as their ability to connect and be present with their children.

Worrying and overprotecting. While some children might become concerned for their parents, a much more frequently occurring narrative theme was about parents' worries about their children's safety and their tendency to become overprotective as a result. Half of the participants brought up the theme of overprotectiveness, with most of them describing that as a con but not necessarily something they would or could readily change, and two parents who spoke about conscientiously working not to be overprotective in their parenting. One mother reported, "I do tend to be probably overprotective than other parents and always in the back of my mind are things that I'm sure a lot of parents aren't thinking about." Another shared, "so, I

think I do try ... to strike a balance, you know. I want to be cautious, I want her to be safe, but at the same time I don't want to ... go to another extreme."

Several parents described being overprotective as the cause of some tension between them and their children. As one participant stated, "sometimes they think that I'm too fixated on them being safe." As the following participant points out, overprotectiveness can also create conflict within the parent, as well as the parent-child relationship:

... One of the drawbacks for me is that I think I've been way overprotective in trying to protect them from everything I see every day, and that has, although I believe I've kept them safe, it's really worn on me, and it's actually worn on my relationship with my 17-year-old son...

Even when these parents are able "to let go," as all parents of adolescents must at some point, they find themselves with a lot of worries. One father shared:

I've just learned to let go, and I have to trust their judgment. I have to trust in my parenting, you know, that it's gotten, that the core messages have gotten through. ... I give her little reminders, ... I said to her the last dance she went to, "remember there's no drinking, there's no drugs, and there's no sex. You leave, you come home the same way you are leaving home, in one piece. But, if you find yourself in trouble, please call me. I will be there for you." And then they leave and I have a panic attack until they come back.

A parent whose daughter was in college stated:

...letting my daughter go away to college was awful for me, and she's doing quite well, you know, and all of that. So, yeah, I think just knowing all of that has made it very hard, like I've lost sleep at different times when they've been away. Just, you know,

sometimes my head will go in the worst places, ... I gave them the best foundation that I could—doesn't make it any easier as the parent.

One parent anticipated having difficulty letting go when her children would be ready to leave the house:

I think that I will always be super overprotective and will probably stalk my kids when they go to college [laughs] to make sure that they're safe, and my guess is that ... when they leave and kinda go off on their own is going to be a really difficult process for me ... because of what I do and so I don't know, maybe that will be good, maybe it will be bad. I'm guessing it will be bad, especially for my daughter.

Again, parents identified more pros than cons and many parents made statements about feeling “lucky,” “grateful,” and “enriched” because of their work in the field, and that it was “an asset to parenting.” The cons that parents presented were reported here more extensively because they could point to unmet needs or future directions for research.

Dialectical complexities. The uniting theme among the most commonly occurring issues that stood out in parents' narratives as struggles were that they all represented a *dialectical tension* of the sexual assault discourse: parents wanted to treat their children the same regardless of gender yet responded to sexual assault as a gendered-issue; they wanted their children to know how sexual assault related to sex without having them conflate the two; they wanted to be open and in line with their philosophy about all subjects yet found it difficult or uncomfortable always to do so; they wanted their children to be aware of the dangers in the world but not negatively impacted because of that knowledge; they wanted their children to know that sexual assault is always the fault of the perpetrator yet still make choices that could increase their safety. As one mother framed the issue about risk reduction:

... There's that whole victim blaming thing around so much of this and I don't really want to go there with her, but on the other hand, you know, there's that thin line between victim blaming and harm reduction. So I'm always trying to figure out how to have conversations with her about that in a way that's not punitive or, if anything were to happen, that she would be afraid to tell me because I told her not to do something and she did it and then she got raped. So it's really hard, that's a really hard part of the conversation.

Another outlined her struggles with the gender dialectic:

... I'm trying to be helpful, but I'm being very gendered with this topic. ... I think I'm more likely to give [my daughter] a pass, and even be proud when she, sort of, stands up for herself. Whereas with [my son] I'm more likely to, you know, go in to this whole, like, mode of, of "one day ... you're going to be bigger than most of the girls and you need to always know that. And you need to make sure that you take responsibility for your size and ... for all of this," which I've never said to [my daughter]. Do you find that these conversations you're having with people ... do people end going, "God, I need to parent differently?" ... We're all wondering if we're doing the right thing.

As is the case with dialectics, there is no easy solution or one right answer, just the constant pursuit of balance. One mother, when asked about rape myths, responded:

... I know that they've been exposed on like television and movies and stuff that if you dress provocatively that you're asking for it. We have talked about that, that it doesn't matter what you wear. ... Well I've specifically said, ... "you should absolutely be able to wear whatever it is that you want. At the same time, what message are you trying to ... give somebody if you're showing your breasts ... in your clothing." I don't say that,

“well you’re asking for it if you dress that way,” but to “really think about what it is that people think about you when you wear certain clothes, just because not everybody has the same awareness or information that you do.”

A few participants navigated the dialectical tension by distinguishing between public and private messages. While they still sought to provide balance in their message and were heavily influenced by their work in the field, when at home their perception of their responsibility as parents to keep their children safe carried more weight than their ideological stance about how to prevent rape on a systematic level. One father stated,

I’ve always said, ... as a male prevention educator, it feels very wrong to tell girls that they need to restrict their basic human rights to... dress and go where they want. It seems like a huge violation of ... personal rights that we impose on our young girls that we don’t necessarily impose on our young boys. So, I don’t feel comfortable telling other girls to restrict their behaviors and that, but then when it comes to my own daughters, I certainly want them to be aware of the dangers of going out alone ... drinking too much, of wearing clothing that might be too revealing and ... attract attention of young boys. ... With prevention ... my focus has always been on what can we do to raise our young boys, what do our young boys need to know to prevent them from ever, ever offending against another person, imposing their sexual needs, desires over and above their partners’. ... I feel much more comfortable in a prevention way addressing ... young boys, but the fact of that matter is that we have young girls, I’ve more daughters than sons, and while I’ve taught him to be very respectful, sadly ... I need to also teach my girls to protect themselves.

A mother stated:

... I work in a rape crisis center where we talk about prevention and we talk about the proper way to frame things and victim blaming and, certainly, it is never somebody's fault. You know, you never want to see somebody become a victim, but at the same time, will I be telling my daughter as she gets older that she shouldn't be walking in the woods at night? Absolutely, because I don't want her to be assaulted, and I want her to be safe. And I think that some of the people I work with might not agree with that but, you know, to minimize the risk is, I think, incredibly important as a mother. [Laughs] As a prevention person my message is to everybody else that this is not okay. I sound like such a hypocrite, but [laughs] you know, they're your kids, you want to protect them in any way that you can.

... So, do I want the world to change? Absolutely. Do I hope it's a completely different place when my kids have kids? Absolutely. I hope that I don't have to be the same kind of grandmother that I, the same educator that I have been as a mother. I hope that it's a little bit safer. But we'll see what happens. [Laughs]. As an educator to the public, yeah, the message is it's just wrong.

Embracing the dialectical tensions inherent in sexual assault work as well as in parenting seems to be the approach that parents committed to this discourse have chosen to take.

Summary

As should be evident from the preceding, participants' discourses were not a simple matter of an isolated talk or confined to only direct conversations about sexual assault. To raise their children with sexual assault prevention in mind, parents addressed behaviors and attitudes all along the continuum of sexual violence, starting with basic respect, boundaries, and consent in everyday interactions. The way parents talked to their children about sexual assault also

developed along a continuum, fitting with their children's learning needs and capabilities, and varying with their developmental experiences and gender. Parents were motivated to talk about sexual assault because of their knowledge of its frequency, their worries about their children possibly becoming victimized or perpetrating, and their belief that they could effect prevention through their parenting.

Talking about consensual sex and sexuality was a very important part of the discourse, with parents actively seeking to create an open atmosphere where their children could come to them with any questions and feel comfortable with any subject. A healthy attitude toward sex and the body as well as an understanding of healthy relationships were viewed as protective measures against sexual assault as well as necessary preparation in case one occurred. While parents sought to differentiate sex and rape, they often talked about them in relationship to each other, stressing consent, respect, and freedom from coercion as the necessary elements for sex to be sex.

Gender and the gendered nature of sexual assault proved to be a difficult issue for a number of parents. While all parents actively sought to raise their children to be individuals unconstrained by gender, their children's gender usually played a large role in how parents thought and talked about sexual assault with them, especially as they moved through adolescence. Sometimes parents felt embarrassed or sad about putting more emphasis on their sons to not perpetrate and on their daughter to protect themselves, while also generally agreeing that it was the nature of the beast to be a gendered issue. Differentiating between public and private messages, the role of sexual assault prevention workers and the role of parents, helped to resolve some participants' ambivalence about this topic.

Teaching about safety also involved some dialectical tensions, as parents struggled with how to approach the topic of “appropriate clothing” and things their children could do to reduce their risk while actively seeking to never suggest that it could be their fault if they did get assaulted. However, teaching about safety also helped parents resolve some of their anxieties, fed by their knowledge about the prevalence of sexual assault, because they could do something proactive to help inform and prepare their children. Parents also thought about the ripple effect that teaching their children had on their peers and were inspired by their children already demonstrating the qualities of intervening bystanders.

The findings were sorted under the general themes of who, what, how, and why for increased clarity and so that participants’ discourses could be presented in a way that might be instructive to any reader interested in embarking on such a path as well.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The Purpose of this Study

The immediate purpose of this study was to learn about the experiences and practices of parents who work in sexual assault-related fields in regard to their parenting. It is well established that people who work in this field (and in all capacities that bring people into frequent contact with trauma) are affected by this work (Allen, 2001), yet there was little known specifically about parents, other than that they felt they become more aware of and anxious about the threats posed to their children's safety in everyday life (Clemans, 2004). This study aimed to address a significant gap in the literature by focusing exclusively on parents—if and how they are influenced, and even more so what they do because of it. This focus on parents' action is key to the study, because beyond the immediate purpose of learning about an undocumented phenomenon, this study was undertaken to be useful to the cause of sexual assault prevention.

Primary prevention—trying to keep rape from happening by challenging that which encourages and reinforces it on every level, individual to structural—is the current paradigm popularly held in the field (Schewe, 2002). Figuring out how to do that effectively, however, poses numerous challenges. The idea of early, primary prevention has catalyzed a shift from exclusively college-based programs to those increasingly tailored to high school, then middle school, and even some elementary school students and curricula (Casey & Nurius, 2008; Clinton-Sherrod et al., 2009; Imbesi, 2007; Weisz & Black, 2001; Weisz & Black, 2009) This

study was in part inspired by wanting to know about even earlier intervention: how sexual assault is approached and responded to by parents with an expertise in prevention and/or response because of their work in the field. How did their knowledge of sexual assault influence or shape their parenting? Was it something they spoke with their children about? If so, how, when, what did they say and do, and why? How did they navigate belonging to this field—holding the stark awareness about the pandemic nature of sexual assault perpetration and victimization that the field all but burns into the consciousness of its workers—with their responsibility as parents, which, at a minimum, is to make sure their children survive, but is more generally viewed as raising well-adjusted people who can themselves navigate and contribute to the world?

Answers to these questions have the potential to shape future preventative efforts. Might what these parents do, the discourse that they create with their children about sexual assault, reduce the risk of their children perpetrating or becoming victimized by sexual assault? Could parents who do not necessarily work in this field learn from them about how to approach sexual assault in their parenting? Could curricula be developed specifically for parents to facilitate speaking to children about these complex issues? As these questions suggest, this study is housed within a feminist research paradigm that seeks to align the pursuit of knowledge with the explicit goals of helping everyone—women, men, and those whose gender identity defies a one-word moniker—become free from the threat and reality of sexual violence.

Key Findings

The key findings of this study were that participants are highly influenced by their work and do indeed create a discourse about sexual assault with their children. While the majority of participants reported having had multiple, ongoing conversations directly about sexual assault

with their children, a discourse about sexual assault expands far beyond only talking about sexual assault. For the majority of parents, it also meant frequently addressing the continuum of sexual violence, sexuality, gender constructs, and safety, with themes of respect, consent, and healthy relationships interwoven among all of these topics. While there was variation in emphasis and specificity in each participant's discourse and often within the discourse among an individual participant's children, the majority of participants actively communicated about all of these topics and all parents actively communicated about at least some of them. For instance, the most outlying participant's discourse included the fewest direct conversations about sexual assault with her daughter but had a very heavy emphasis on safety. Where her discourse shared the most commonality with the majority of participants was in the ways it provided access to accurate information about sexuality, discussions about and access to contraception, and modeling and discussions that challenged traditional gender expectations and depictions of women.

Most parents' discourses did include frequent discussions or references to sexual assault, often specific to their children's gender: talking to sons more frequently about always respecting and seeking their partner's consent, using their strength to help and protect rather than to harm and force, and challenging men who make sexist and/or rape supportive statements; talking to daughters more often about self-respect and self-confidence, high-risk situations, and what they can do to reduce their risk. For all children regardless of gender, there was a focus on respect for oneself and others, boundaries, consent, and healthy relationships and sexuality. For most parents, sexual assault was something that came up organically in conversations, often in response to a depiction in a television show, the local news, or song lyrics with problematic language.

Even when not explicitly part of the discussion, parents' awareness of sexual assault appeared to be in the back of their minds and an influential force on their parenting, making them alert to issues that parents without that background might not notice, deem important, or approach in the same way. For instance, certain, often typical, childhood behaviors, such as siblings disrespecting each other's boundaries or children repeating sexist or misogynist statements picked up from friends or popular culture, often rang an alarm bell for parents who participated in this study. Though parents addressed these issues in the moment for what they were, not inflating or catastrophizing them, they very purposefully took them up because they perceived them as fitting into the continuum of sexual violence. Instead of responding by just telling their children to cease the behavior, these parents were likely to talk about the importance of boundaries and respecting someone who is saying no, or to pose a challenging question that encouraged the child to critically examine his or her behavior. By interrupting and curtailing these behaviors when they presented themselves in relatively benign forms, parents hoped to inhibit the development of attitudes and behaviors that reside on the more extreme end of the spectrum. Along these lines, many parents talked about viewing sexual assault as a social justice issue and discussed making discussions of intersecting oppressions—such as racism and homophobia—part of their discourse, thus setting the example and expectation to their children to oppose any attitudes or actions that seek to dehumanize, control, or deny the legitimacy of any person or group. Through these ways, parents were constantly responding to issues related to their understanding of sexual assault and enacting a discourse about and informed by it.

Another major part of parents' discourse with their children was discussions about sex, sexuality, and healthy relationships. These conversations were often classified as daily, ongoing and organic; no parent suggested that they had had "the sex talk" and were now done with the

subject. Parents aimed to be non-shaming in their discussions of sexuality and wanted to create an atmosphere where their children would be comfortable talking about anything. Sex and rape were frequently spoken about in tandem; parents might draw on their children's knowledge of sex to explain rape, though they were careful to differentiate the two. In discussions about sexual situations their children might be in, parents would talk about the centrality of consent throughout an interaction and might lay out for their children how what might have been anticipated as a sexual encounter can turn into a sexual assault scenario. Parents wanted their children to be able to communicate with romantic partners in all stages of their relationship, to be able to state their own limits and expectations and to recognize those of their partners. Teaching their children about healthy relationships and how people respectfully and non-violently resolve conflict was also a major goal for parents, who viewed it as having a risk-reducing function.

Parents had two main motivations for creating discourses with their children about sexual assault. They wanted, as much as possible, to protect their children from harm. However, knowing that they had no way of guaranteeing their children's safety, they also wanted their children to be well prepared for whatever they might encounter in the world. While this preparation might be viewed as something that could help reduce the risk their children might face, it was also to help their children be able to respond to being assaulted or support a friend through it in a way that would be the most health promoting for the survivor. To accomplish these aims, parents' discourses included much discussion, modeling, and emphasis on decision-making, the elements of high-risk situations, respectful interactions, open communication, and challenging attitudes that place blame on a victim. They also were explicit in their expectations for their children that they should always tell someone if they've been hurt and get all the care

required. Parents believed they could effect prevention through the information and messages they passed along to their children.

Major findings also demonstrated how parents sought to effectively transmit their messages, creating a home atmosphere synchronous with their discourse and employing a variety of strategies to relay their values and encourage their children's intellectual and emotional processing of the issues related to sexual assault. As these issues often required recognizing and balancing dialectically opposed truths, parents expressed some doubts and ambivalence about the propriety or potential adverse effects of the messages they were sending, as well as their skillfulness in doing so. They also struggled at times with their increased knowledge of the numerous ways in which their children were at risk. Some labeled themselves overprotective and reported tensions it could create with their children. However, participants decidedly described their work in the field as a benefit to their parenting, believing that it provided them useful knowledge and tools to raise safe, responsible children who could make positive contributions to the world.

Connections to Established Knowledge

The finding that all parents in this study were highly influenced by their work and this influence very much extended into their parenting practice is consistent with Clemans' (2004) and Goldblatt et al.'s (2009) conclusions about the transformational effect for women working in trauma fields, their private and family lives changed because of their work experience. The present study also adds to the work of the previous authors by suggesting that the same holds true for men.

The present study also explores the mechanisms through which this influence is transmitted to workers' children, the discourse about sexual assault, its component parts, its

enactment, and parent's reasons for creating it. Clemans' (2004) study, which only focused on parents briefly, found that parents in the field "become more protective and cautious," a result of the increased awareness of the risks their children face (p. 153). The present study lends support to this conclusion while expanding on it and theorizing about its effects on parents' behavior: parents worry about both the possibility of sexual assault victimization and perpetration among their children. While for many of them their fears led to increased monitoring and what many participants described as being "overprotective," their knowledge and awareness also inspired and guided them to proactively attempt to foster prevention within their home. Though they knew they could not ultimately protect their children from experiencing sexual assault, they could provide them with "the best foundation" in terms of knowledge, attitudes and values, prevention skills, strong personal boundaries, comfort discussing sexuality, and ability to withstand and challenge the mores of a rape supportive culture. As such, they created an evolving discourse with their children that encompassed these topics while being responsive to the development and needs of the child. This sensitivity is particularly important and shows commonality with prevention programming guidelines for children and adolescents, which seeks to "allow young people to enter discussion in a safe and respectful way and this often means starting where they are, with their language, their concepts and their interests and understandings" (Imbesi, 2007, citing Urbis Keys Young, 2004 and Keel, 2005). The findings that are encased within this formulation of parents' discourses are highly important because they offer a model of how these parents respond to the realistic knowledge of the danger their children face, the anxiety this knowledge creates in them as parents, and what these parents conceive of as their role.

Consciousness and identity. Parents' practice of creating a discourse offers support to the proposal made earlier here that work experience in sexual assault functions as a type of *targeted social identity*, a pervasive awareness and consciousness gained through work experience that becomes internalized by the worker. Because both men and women in the field come to see how the dominant, rape-supportive culture is a harm and a threat to everyone's welfare, including one's self and children, it is similar in many ways to the experience of having one or more targeted social identities, regardless of your own gender identity.

Clarification might be brought through comparison to a very well established targeted social identity within the United States—being Black/African American. The recent shooting death of the unarmed Black teenager, Trayvon Martin, on February 26, 2012, and the subsequent outrage once it was discovered that the man who shot him was not being charged, prompted many Black parents to speak or write openly about the constant fear they have for their children's safety when outside the home, particularly for their adolescent sons. Charles Blow (2012), an editorial columnist in the New York Times, described how:

As the father of two black teenage boys, this case hits close to home. This is the fear that seizes me whenever my boys are out in the world: that a man with a gun and an itchy finger will find them "suspicious." That passions may run hot and blood run cold. That it might all end with a hole in their chest and hole in my heart. That the law might prove insufficient to salve my loss.

That is the burden of black boys in America and the people that love them: running the risk of being descended upon in the dark and caught in the cross-hairs of someone who crosses the line.

African American parents also discussed “the talk” they feel they must have with their children, about the risks they face as Black youth in a country whose racist legacy conflates that identity with that of criminal threat, about how to conduct themselves in response to police in order to diffuse a situation, even when it is clear that they are being treated unjustly by law enforcement, and how to prepare for the racism they are likely to experience throughout their lives (Touré, 2012; Green, 2012). This talk is far from a contemporary phenomenon brought on by this particular travesty; referred to in the literature as *racial socialization*, it has been practiced for generations and is considered “one of the most important parenting tasks of African Americans” (Boyd-Franklin, 2003, p. 34, citing McAdoo, 2002). Nancy Boyd-Franklin (2003) describes racial socialization as:

a process that provides children with pride in their racial and cultural identity and self-esteem and educates them about the racism that exists in this country so that they are not caught unprepared when they encounter discrimination in their lives. The challenge for African American parents has been to accomplish this complex task without making their children bitter (Boyd-Franklin et al., 2001). (p. 34).

To help keep their children safe and to prepare them to navigate the terrible risks they face because of the injustice of others, the majority of African American parents undertake this talk in some manner. The similarities of the discourses presented in the present study to “the talk” described by Black parents are numerous, as are the motivations of prevention and preparation. Paralleling the language of *racial socialization*, it might be useful to theorize these discourses as a *sexual assault socialization process*, though a different name might be preferred. Again, while I believe there are many similarities in the response of these groups of parents to the knowledge about what their children face and the anxiety this knowledge produces as well as theoretical

usefulness in conceptualizing participating in sexual assault work as a form of targeted social identity, I am not suggesting that they are identical phenomena. They do contain a number of parallels, however, and further research about parents in the sexual assault field would likely benefit from a grounding in the literature about Black parents and the process of racial socialization.

Hypothesizing effectiveness. A thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of the participants' discourses with their children would require a longitudinal, mixed methods study, ideally one that started following subjects when their children were age two or three and included interviews with the children as they grow. However, there are many parallels between what parents reported about their discourse and what is established or theorized as useful in sexual assault prevention literature. This could be in part a result of exposure, through reading, trainings, or participation in prevention programs, to the ideas presented in these studies. Whether parents were influenced by the literature of the field or whether they came to these ideas on their own through the experience of parenting is an interesting question but not of high importance. The commonalities between the established literature and participants' discourses justify a hypothesis that the creation of a discourse about sexual assault is an effective preventative and harm-reducing intervention, deserving of further study and development.

Parents presented sexual assault as existing on a continuum of violent and violence-supporting behaviors, including bullying, and worked throughout their children's lives to inhibit the development of these behaviors by addressing them in the moment. This practice aligns both with a theoretical view of rape as well as guidelines for primary prevention and bystander intervention (Espelage et al., 2012; McMahon & Banyard, 2012; Schewe, 2002), suggesting that its efficacy extends into the parenting realm.

Parents' narratives demonstrated how they challenged rape myths, rape supportive attitudes, and rigid/misogynistic gender roles, which are all frequently exhibited by perpetrators of sexual assault (Abbey, 2005; Berkowitz, 2002; Campbell et al., 2009; Eastal, 1993; Gidycz et al., 2011, Hall & Hirschman, 1993; Maier, 2008; O'Byrne et al., 2008). Parents accomplished these challenges in a number of ways. Many parents involved their children in anti-rape and anti-violence activities such as volunteering for their agency or participating in awareness-raising events. This is likely an effective practice based on the theory that it is actually behavior that shapes attitudes (Schewe, 2002; Schewe & Bennett, 2002), so taking part in anti-rape event is one way to supports the development of an anti-rape consciousness. Parents also provided gender differentiated messages to their children about sexual assault, including those that emphasize men's responsibility to stop rape. This is a form of message delivery that is highly recommended by the field (Berkowitz, 2002; Clinton-Sherrod et al., 2009; Exner & Cummings, 2011; Schewe, 2002a, Ullman, 2002).

It is known that parental monitoring of children's activities and specific communications about sex decrease children's involvement in high-risk activities (DeVore & Ginsburg, 2005; Stanton et al., 2004); many parents in the study talked about always making sure they knew and approved where there children were going and with whom. Study participants also had many conversations with their children about sexual activity, frequently encouraging their children to postpone intercourse and be responsible and respectful in their sexual interactions with others. It has also been shown that daughters who grow up in families where communication about sexuality is facilitated and encouraged are more likely to disclose a sexual assault experience to their parents, thus generally being able to access more support following an assault, than women who grew up in family environments where such conversations were discouraged (Smith &

Cook, 2008). A very common theme among participants was that they created an open atmosphere where nothing was taboo because they wanted their children, male and female, to be comfortable talking to them about anything, in the hope that, if an assault occurred, they would feel comfortable turning to their parents or local support systems (agencies, crisis centers, medical personnel) for help. Furthermore, an intervention that instructed mothers about how to effectively talk with their college-bound daughters about the risks of alcohol use and sexual assault found a decrease of victimization rates among the study group (Testa et al., 2010). This, too, was a significant theme in parents' discourses with their children. Thus, parents messages about sex, which reflect the emphasis on a positive sense of sexuality promoted by third-wave feminism (Friedman & Valenti, 2008), also share commonalities with a number of effective approaches as established in the literature.

Other significant themes found in participating parents' narratives are echoed in prevention practices and theories about what is needed to reduce rape prevalence; these themes include, but are not limited to: bystander intervention and the importance of peers (Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010; Gidycz et al., 2011; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2011; McMahon & Banyard, 2012) and belief in the importance of primary prevention (Schewe, 2002; White & Smith, 2004). Even with this cursory comparison of parents' discourses to the established literature, the potential of these discourses is extremely promising.

Limitations

The findings from this study must be viewed within light of its limitations. While the qualitative interview design allowed for a flexible, rich exploration of the issues and was particularly well suited to its previously undeveloped subject matter, it carries the inherent threats to trustworthiness of reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias (Padgett, 2008).

Efforts to enhance the rigor of the study were undertaken but these cannot claim to render moot any impact of bias.

A major limitation of this study was in its execution. As an inexperienced researcher conducting my first qualitative study, I do not have the technical knowledge of qualitative research and analysis methods that could provide a boost to this study's validity and rigor. I have tried to be mindful of my biases and to bring a personal and functional reflexive practice throughout the process of conducting this study, a way of increasing transparency about my role. However, there likely remain numerous issues of which I am unaware or improvements in design and presentation that could have been facilitated by greater familiarity and command of qualitative methodologies. A related limitation of the study is that it has largely been conceived, conducted, and written by a sole researcher, and again, a student. While produced in much consultation with my research advisor, including an independent corroboration of initial themes, it has not benefitted from the increased knowledge and critical awareness that a research team might offer.

A strength of semi-structured interviews is the opportunity they provided for participants to make in-depth statements with minimal hardship on their part, ask clarifying questions, and respond to researcher follow-ups. As a researcher, interviews also allowed me flexibility to respond to the particular participant, ask tailored follow-up questions, and ask for clarification. Whereas a potential limitation of interviews is that they do not provide the opportunity for anonymity, and the safety that can provide for people to counter social desirability, it seemed that parents appeared to be open with me about their struggles and concerns, rather than projecting an exclusively optimistic or positive evaluation of their actions and the results. However, social desirability might have played a role in participants' responses to the researcher

or questions nonetheless. Another limitation of using in depth semi-structured interviews is the feasibility constraints it places on the project. I would have been able to use a much larger sample if participants had been surveyed, as transcription and scheduling would not have been a concern.

While the small sample size in this study exceeds the minimum requirement set for Smith College School for Social Work qualitative theses, it is still a relatively small sample. Given the in-depth nature of the interviews and the limited time frame for the project, it was adequate for the purposes of a masters' thesis. Judged by phenomenological standards, this sample size would be adequate for publication; however, it is not large enough for full development of a grounded theory.

Another potential limitation of the sample is its selectivity. People who ended up participating were highly motivated to do so, as they had to complete multiple steps to qualify. It is also possible that parents in the field who did not feel they created a discourse about sexual assault with their children simply did not respond to the request for participants. As such, there is a potential self-selection bias in the sample for people eager to speak about this subject because it has particular personal relevance for them.

A strength of this sample is that it is comprised of people who have a wide variety of experiences among sexual assault-related fields including but not limited to nurses, therapists, advocates, state officials, researchers, response coordinators, and educators. Some parents' work has been specifically focused on childhood sexual assault/abuse, some on college students, and some with offenders. While this diversity of experience and focus could have an effect on the variation in content and approach of parents' discourses (for example, someone who works primarily with child victims might have a different perspective than someone who works

primarily with adult survivors), it is suggestive of the transferability of the findings to all parents within related fields. However, a larger sample size that would enable reaching theoretical saturation would be required before transferability could reasonably be established.

Implications for Future Research

I believe this study opens the ground to many new areas of research, as well as for practice and policy. Furthermore, the outpouring of enthusiasm in response to the recruitment request for this study indicates that there is great interest within the field to further address and explore the issues parents face. A continuation of the current research and further sampling is needed in order to reach theoretical saturation and create a truly grounded theory that can more thoroughly present what it is these parents do, how and why they do it, and what they think about it. Recruiting for a more diverse sample and also specifically seeking people who do not perceive their parenting to have been influenced in this way would help achieve this. Opening up the age requirements for the children so that parents of younger children can be included in the sample would also be useful, as (though the word choice and content might be slightly different) we would have a better picture of the evolution of the discourse and what parents of young children focus on.

An important issue that should be explored in the next stage of this research is the responsibility parents feel that their childrearing must raise sons who will not perpetrate sexual assault. The flipside of this belief, though it was not stated as such by participants, is that they might consider themselves personally responsible if this were to happen. Just as the history of sexual assault prevention is rife with blaming the victim, the medical, psychological, and social work literature has been apt to blame problems in mental health functioning on parents and

mothers particular (Wedenoja, 1991) The choice to perpetrate sexual assault likely has no one determining factor.

As stated earlier, evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach is necessary to determine whether it should be recommended to all parents. Prior to a longitudinal evaluation, it is necessary to further explore the potential benefits and harms of the approach on children. Though it will not speak to its effectiveness as a sexual assault prevention, it could support the needed to set up a pilot program and experimental investigation.

If it is established, as I predict, that a discourse or sexual assault socialization process is beneficial in general, effective methods and techniques should be developed that can be taught to parents, regardless of their familiarity with the field. These techniques should take into account the findings of this study about fitting the discourse to the individual development and needs of the child. For instance, what approach should be taken with children who manifest a lot of anxiety in their daily lives? What about children on the autism spectrum or other non-typically developing neurological processing? Is there “universal information” all parents should teach? If it is important to bring in a discourse that specifically addresses sexual assault, how can we help parents who think it is not right for their child? How can the discourse (in whatever form) be presented such that more parents can adopt/adapt it?

There are also implications for sexual assault program and policy directors, as well as funders. It is likely that staff members who are parents are facing many of the same issues and responding similarly as participants in the study. While struggling to deal with children’s growing independence and worrying about their safety are not issues unique to parents who work in sexual assault-related fields, these parents are readily provided with “fuel” for their anxieties in what they encounter daily at work. Combining parents’ worries with the impact of seeing, for

many people in the field, children who have been sexually assaulted, seems like it could increase the rates of burnout and possibly be a factor worker turnover. Or, like some parents in the study, workers may not be sure about how to best approach a certain topic with their children, or might benefit from the support and guidance of colleagues. It would likely be helpful for agencies to develop some kind of guidance or formalized support to help parents manage these issues, or at least to start discussing them regularly in staff meetings and/or supervision. The more that agencies can meet workers' needs and support them where they feel vulnerable, the more likely workers will be able to withstand the many stresses of this work, which ultimately helps survivors (Clemans, 2004; Herman, 1992; Hesse, 2002).

The participants' various struggles with the issue of how to talk to their sons both about male perpetration and male victimization also reflects a problem the field faces in general about inclusivity and validation of "non-traditional" victims. Sexual assault is and will likely remain a gendered issue in which the vast majority of perpetrators are male and the majority of victims are female. However, there must be recognition and appropriate space made for people whose experience does not align with the statistical expectations.

This study is the first step in a new direction, but one that is supported by disparate fields of knowledge; it suggests much promise for future inquiry. There may never be a world completely without rape, but there can be something much closer to that ideal than where we currently are. As the field of sexual assault prevention searches for an intervention, for a way to make primary prevention effective and the norm, we might do well to look at what is already happening among the parents who constitute this field. The discourse they create with their children has at best the potential to prevent or reduce perpetration and victimization and at least the ability to produce aware, accurately informed people with a personal connection to

prevention. Further study is of course required before any policies that promote this discourse could be put in place, but as something that seems to be already happening, it should be given our full attention. There is not a simple, single solution to the problem of rape; a complex biopsychosocial problem requires a multipronged, complex solution. However, *an* answer might be with us already. It deserves a closer look.

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Appendix A

Study Qualification Screening Information

*Please read the following statements and indicate **Yes** or **No** as to whether the statement describes you:*

- I am the parent of at least one child over the age of ten. (Yes/No)
- I am an active participant in my child's upbringing. (Yes/No)
- I consider sexual assault to be or have been a primary focus of my work, such that:
 - Sexual assault is an area of professional interest and expertise. (Yes/No)
 - I have at least two years experience working with issues of sexual assault prevention and/or response (volunteer work included) as a therapist, advocate, researcher, educator, prevention specialist and/or crisis line respondent.
(Yes/No)
- My work in sexual assault started before or while at least one of my children reached age 10.
(Yes/No)

The current study parameters require that participants can answer affirmatively to all of the above statements. If you answered "no" to any statement, thank you very much for your interest thus far. If you would be interested in possibly being contacted at a later date should the qualification requirements change, please indicate (Yes/No) and provide your contact information below.

If all of the above statements apply to you, you are eligible for participation in a research study exploring how parents in sexual assault-related fields create a discourse with their own children about sexual assault. Please provide the following information:

Your name: _____

The age and gender of your child/children: _____

Contact information (including a phone number and either a fax or mailing address):

*I will be sending you the Informed Consent and a preview of the interview questions. I will need a signed copy of the Informed Consent, returned by fax, mail, or email (if you have a scanner) by or before the interview. **How would you like me to send this to you?** _____*

Appendix B



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 14, 2012

Karen Taylor

Dear Karen,

I am happy to approve your changes and your project.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'David L. Burton'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Rachel Burnett, Research Advisor

Appendix C

Dear [person's name],

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Karen Taylor, and I am a master's-level student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am currently at work on a research project that will serve as the basis of my master's thesis. Through my research I am seeking to explore the perspectives and practices of a diverse group of parents with professional experience in sexual assault related fields and learn about how they create a discourse with their own children about sexual assault. I see my project as having the potential to contribute to our understanding of sexual assault prevention, an area to which I am very much committed.

I am writing to you [because you have been recommended to me as someone who might be interested in the study] or [because, in reviewing the literature, I have come across some of your work/your name] or [I came across your name/organization while researching sexual assault resource centers and/or intervention programs]. Of course I do not know if you are a parent, but if you are the parent of at least one child age ten or older and started doing sexual assault-related work before or while raising children, I hope you will consider participating in my study. The process would consist of a short demographics questionnaire and an interview, conducted in person or over the phone or Skype, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interview questions will be provided in advance along with the Informed Consent form. This study has been approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee of Smith College.

You have my sincere gratitude for taking the time to read this letter. I hope to hear back from you, and that you will consider participating in the interview process. Please feel free to contact me with any questions, concerns, or suggestions. Also, please feel welcome to forward this letter to any friends or colleagues who you think might be interested in participating in such a study. And thank you for doing the work you do—may we someday find that it is no longer necessary. Until then,

Peace and strength and many thanks,

Karen Taylor

Appendix D

Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

My name is Karen Taylor, and I am a Master's-level Social Work student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am currently conducting a qualitative research study that centers on the conducting of interviews with willing, qualified people. I am interested in learning about how parents who have professional and/or volunteer experience working in a sexual assault-related field talk to or teach their own children about sexual assault and related issues. The purpose of this research is to contribute to the knowledge about effective sexual assault prevention efforts. The data will be used as the focus of my MSW thesis, with the possibility of future presentations and/or publication.

You will be asked to sit for an interview with me, either in person, over the phone, or using video-phone technology such as Skype, at a time convenient to you. Interviews are estimated to last between 60 to 90 minutes. You will also be asked to answer a short demographic questionnaire. Eligibility requirements for participation are that you:

- Have significant professional or volunteer experience (two years or longer) working on sexual assault prevention efforts and/or in response to occurrences of sexual assault as an advocate, crisis line respondent, educator, researcher, prevention specialist, and/or therapist.
 - A criterion for participation related to occupational status is that sexual assault must be or have been a primary focus of your work, defined as sexual assault being an area of professional interest and expertise and that you have at least two years experience working with issues of sexual assault prevention and/or response (volunteer work included)
- Started working in the field before or while at least one of your children turned ten.
- Have at least one child who is age ten or older and are or have been an active participant in the child's upbringing. Biological or legal relation to the child is not necessary, as long as you self-identify as an active parent.

Interviews will be audio recorded onto my computer using standard Apple software (Garageband). I will then transcribe these interviews personally, or if need be, by a professional transcriber who will sign a confidentiality pledge.

Risks in participating are minimal. Questions regarding sexual assault will only refer to the influence of your professional experience with the field, and will not seek information about any personal experiences. A preview list of interview questions will be provided to you prior to the interview to minimize the possibility of unanticipated questions. Please know that you may decline to answer any interview questions at any time. A referral resources list will not be provided. Benefits of participation include advancing the knowledge of a field to which you belong, sharing your take on how to raise safe, healthy children, and potentially improving on current sexual assault prevention efforts. You might find that you gain personally through the opportunity to reflect on how your professional work informs your parenting. Compensation is not provided for your participation in this study.

Confidentially can be reasonably provided in this research. Advisors to my research will have access to the data for this study, but with your identifying information removed. Confidentiality during the interview itself will be maintained to the extent possible depending on the location chosen by you and agreed to by me. The recording will immediately be uploaded to my personal computer that is password locked and stored securely in my home. I will then transcribe these interviews personally, or if need be, by a professional transcriber who will sign a confidentiality pledge. All data (notes, digital recordings, transcripts, etc.) will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years as required by Federal guidelines and data stored electronically will be protected. If the data is needed beyond the three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed. Though I do not anticipate that interviewees who see clients will discuss their cases, please be mindful not to identify clients should you speak of them. In any presentations or publications resulting from this research study, data will be presented in aggregate form and any illustrative vignettes or quotes will be carefully disguised.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the data collection process and may refuse to answer any question at any time. Furthermore, for up to two weeks following the interview you may contact me by phone or email and have your interview transcript and any demographic data deleted. At that time all materials pertaining to you will be immediately destroyed. If you have any additional questions or wish to withdraw please contact me through the contact information listed below. Should you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of this study, you are encouraged to call me at **(personal information deleted by Laura H. Wyman, 11/30/12)** or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413.585.7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Thank you for your time and your participation in this work.

With gratitude,

Karen Taylor

Appendix E

Preview Interview Questions

This preview is provided for you so that you have a chance to familiarize yourself with the types of questions that I will ask you if you are willing to participate in an interview. You will be asked questions that fall roughly into the three following categories:

- I: Navigation of professional and parenting roles
- II: Gender roles
- III. Attitudes

The following nine questions will form the basis of the interview:

- 1) What do your children know about your work? Have you talked to your children about your work and what you do there?
- 2) Have you had a direct conversation with your child/ren about sexual assault?
- 3) Are there ways in which you think your knowledge and awareness about sexual assault has altered or influenced your parenting?
- 4) What would you identify as the pros and cons of your dual role as parent and sexual assault [educator/researcher/advocate, etc]?
- 5) How do you talk to or demonstrate to your child about gender, both your child's own gender and other genders?
- 6) When you think about educating your son/daughter about sexual assault, is there anything you think about and specifically want them to know because of your child's gender?
- 7) Have you had a "sex talk" with your children about consensual sex and "healthy" relationships? If so, please summarize.
- 8) Are there specific values and concepts related to your knowledge of sexual assault that you want or try to pass on to your children? (If asked for clarification, might specify respectful attitudes toward women, understanding of consent, a sense of agency within their own bodies).
- 9) Rape myths, as you probably know, is the term used for false but commonly held views about rape, such as that a victim's clothing choices are in part to blame for the rapist's actions or that most victims are lying when they claim a rape occurred. Are there any rape myths to which you believe your child has been exposed (in entertainment media, in the news, stated by peers)? What are they?

Questions provided on this form are in their generic version and may or may not be applicable to you, depending on the age of your child/children. Follow up questions, which have not been provided, will seek clarification or expansion of the main question, but will not bring up new topic areas. Please remember that you are welcome to participate in the interview process even if there are certain questions that you would prefer not to answer.

Appendix F

Interview Guide

I: Navigation of professional and parenting roles

1) What do your children know about your work? Have you talked to your children about your work and what you do there?

If yes 1a) How have you talked about or described your work to your child/ren?

1b) If you have worked in the field when your children were younger, how has their knowledge of what you do changed over time?

If no 1c) Under what circumstances do you think you would talk to them about it? What might you want them to know, and when?

2) Have you had a direct conversation with your child/ren about sexual assault?

If yes 2a) Please describe content/message of conversation.

2b) What was the context of the conversation? For example, what age was the child, were there identifiable precipitating factors, such as a related television program or a high-risk situation?)

2c) Do you think the gender of your child played a role in the initiation, content, or message of the conversation?

If no 2d) Is having a direct conversation about sexual assault something you have considered?

2e) Is there an age at which you anticipate initiating such a conversation?

2f) Are there identifiable reasons why you have not had and/or do not plan to have a direct conversation?

3) Are there ways in which you think your knowledge and awareness about sexual assault has altered or influenced your parenting?

4) What would you identify as the pros and cons of your dual role as parent and sexual assault [educator/researcher/advocate, etc]?

II: Gender roles

5) How do you talk to or demonstrate to your child about gender, both your child's own gender and other genders (Example, talking to your son about what it means to be a boy or man/daughter about what it means to be a girl or woman?)

- Question for examples

6) When you think about educating your son/daughter about sexual assault, is there anything you think about and specifically want them to know because of your child's gender?

III. Attitudes

7) Have you had a "sex talk" with your children about consensual sex and "healthy" relationships? If so, please summarize.

If yes 7a) Have you included or linked a discussion of rape/sexual assault to a discussion of "normative" and/or "healthy" behavior?

If no 7b) Do you foresee approaching the topic in the future? If so, when (what age child)/ what would you want them to know?

8) Are there specific values and concepts related to your knowledge of sexual assault that you want or try to pass on to your children? (If asked for clarification, might specify respectful attitudes toward women, understanding of consent, a sense of agency within their own bodies).

9) Rape myths, as you probably know, is the term used for false but commonly held views about rape, such as that a victim's clothing choices are in part to blame for the rapist's

actions or that most victims are lying when they claim a rape occurred. Are there any rape myths to which you believe your child has been exposed (in entertainment media, in the news, stated by peers)? What are they?

If yes 9a) Have you responded to this exposure, and if so, how?

If no/unsure 9b) If you and your child were watching the news or a tv program together and a story included what you would consider as a rape myth, how would you imagine yourself responding?